

ROBERT SPENCER - BLOGGING THE QUR'AN	
Blogging the Qur'an: Introduction	4
Sura 1, "The Opening"	6
Sura 2, "The Cow," verses 1-39	8
Sura 2, "The Cow," verses 40-75	10
Sura 2, "The Cow," verses 75-140	12
Sura 2, "The Cow," verses 141-210	14
Sura 2, "The Cow," verses 211-221	16
Sura 2, "The Cow," verses 222-286	18
Sura 3, "The Family of Imran," verses 1-32	20
Sura 3, "The Family of Imran," verses 33-63	22
Sura 3, "The Family of Imran," verses 64-120	24
Sura 3, "The Family of Imran," verses 121-200	26
Sura 4, "Women," verses 1-16	28
Sura 4, "Women," verses 17-34	30
Sura 4, "Women," verses 35-104	32
Sura 4, "Women," verses 104-176	34
Sura 5, "The Table," verses 1-60	36
Sura 5, "The Table," verses 61-120	38
Sura 6, "Cattle," verses 1-83	40
Sura 6, "Cattle," verses 84-165	42
Sura 7, "The Heights," verses 1-102	44
Sura 7, "The Heights," verses 103-206	46
Sura 8, "Booty," verses 1-30	48
Sura 8, "Booty," verses 31-75	50
Sura 9, "Repentance," verses 1-5	52
Sura 9, "Repentance," verses 6-14	54
Sura 9, "Repentance," verses 14-28	56
Sura 9, "Repentance," verse 29	58
Sura 9, "Repentance," verse 29, Part 2	60

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 9, "Repentance," verses 30-49	63
Sura 9, "Repentance," verses 50-80	65
Sura 9, "Repentance," verses 81-129	67
Sura 10, "Jonah"	69
Sura 11, "Hud"	71
Sura 12, "Joseph"	73
Sura 13, "The Thunder"	75
Sura 14, "Abraham"	77
Sura 15, "Rock City"	79
Sura 16, "The Bee"	81
Sura 17, "The Night Journey," verse 1	83
Sura 17, "The Night Journey," verses 2-111	85
Sura 18, "The Cave," verses 1-59	87
Sura 18, "The Cave," verses 60-82	89
Sura 18, "The Cave," verses 83-110	91
Sura 19, "Mary"	93
Sura 20, "Ta Ha"	95
Sura 21, "The Prophets"	97
Sura 22, "The Pilgrimage"	99
Sura 23, "The Believers"	101
Sura 24, "The Light," verses 1-20	103
Sura 24, "The Light," verses 21-64	105
Sura 25, "The Criterion"	107
Sura 26, "The Poets"	109
Sura 27, "The Ant"	111
Sura 28, "The Story"	113
Sura 29, "The Spider"	115
Sura 30, "The Byzantines," and Sura 31, "Luqman"	117
Sura 32, "The Prostration"	119
Sura 33, "The Confederates," verses 1-27	121

Sura 33, “The Confederates,” verses 21-73	123
Sura 34, “Sheba,” and Sura 35, “The Angels”	126
Sura 36, “Ya Sin”	128
Sura 37, “The Ranks”	130
Sura 38, “Sad”	132
Sura 39, “Throngs”	134
Sura 40, “The Forgiver”	136
Suras 41, “Explained in Detail,” and 42, “Consultation”	138
Suras 43, “Ornaments of Gold,” 44, “Smoke,” and 45, “Crouching”	140
Sura 46, “The Dunes”	142
Suras 47, “Muhammad,” and 48, “Victory”	144
Suras 49, “The Chambers,” 50, “Qaf,” 51, “The Winnowing Winds,” and 52, “The Mount”	146
Sura 53, “The Star”	148
Suras 54, “The Moon,” 55, “The Merciful,” 56, “The Inevitable,” and 57, “Iron”	150
Suras 58, “The Pleading Woman,” and 59, “Exile”	152
Sura 60, “She Who Is Tested”	154
Suras 61, “Battle Array,” and 62, “The Congregation”	156
Suras 63, “The Hypocrites,” 64, “Haggling,” 65, “Divorce,” and 66, “Prohibition”	158
Suras 67, “Sovereignty,” 68, “The Pen,” 69, “The Reality,” 70, “The Ways of Ascent,” and 71, “Noah”	160
Suras 72, “The Jinn,” 73, “The Mantled One,” 74, “The Cloaked One,” 75, “Resurrection,” and 76, “Man”	162
Suras 77-86	164
Suras 87-95	166
Sura 96, “Clots of Blood”	168
Suras 97-114	170

Blogging the Qur'an: Introduction

To understand the motives and goals of Islamic jihad terrorists, one good place to start might be to explore what they themselves say about why they're doing what they're doing, and what they want. That in turn will lead you to the Qur'an (or Koran), the Islamic holy book. The [jihadists quote it frequently](#) and portray themselves as those who are following "[pure Islam](#)," the genuine article as it is taught in the Qur'an and Islamic tradition. So in the course of my work explaining the jihadists' objectives, I've quoted the Qur'an a great deal – and hardly a day goes by without my being accused of “cherry-picking” violent passages, and quoting them “out of context.” Meanwhile, the Council on American Islamic Relations and other Muslim groups say that in order to understand the true, peaceful Islam, we should read the Qur'an.

So over the course of the next few months, I'm going to read it, and discuss it in a series of columns. All of it. Not “cherry-picked” or “out of context.” The whole thing, beginning to end. Some of you may be familiar with David Plotz's series on Slate, “[Blogging the Bible](#).” This series will be similar to that one, but rather than just write about what I think or feel about a certain passage, I will, unlike Plotz, refer to commentaries – all Muslim ones – on the Qur'an. I'll try to explain how mainstream Muslims who study the Qur'an will understand any given passage, and what its import might be for non-Muslims.

You'll need a Qur'an. The following link provides a very accurate Arabic/English translation of it: <http://www.oneummah.net/component/content/article/1-latest/95-quran-project.html>. In traditional Islamic theology, the Qur'an is essentially and inherently an “Arabic Qur'an” (as the Qur'an describes itself repeatedly: see [12:2](#); [20:113](#); [39:28](#); [41:3](#); [41:44](#); [42:7](#); and [43:3](#)). Its meaning can be rendered in other languages, but those translations are not the Qur'an, which when no longer in Arabic is no longer itself. Some Muslim scholars even claim that the Qur'an cannot be fully understood except in Arabic, but the blizzard of translations made by Muslims for Muslims who don't speak Arabic (who are the great majority around the world today) as well as to proselytize among non-Muslims belies that claim. [Here](#) are two popular Muslim translations, those of Abdullah Yusuf Ali and Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, along with a third by M. H. Shakir. [Here](#) is another popular translation, that of Muhammad Asad. And [here](#) is an omnibus of ten Qur'an translations.

The Qur'an is, according to classic Islamic thought, a perfect copy of a book that has existed eternally with Allah, the one true God, in Heaven: “it is a transcript of the eternal book [in Arabic, “mother of the book”] in Our keeping, sublime, and full of wisdom” ([43:4](#)). The angel Gabriel revealed it in sections to Muhammad (570-632), an Arabian merchant. Like Jesus, Muhammad left the written recording of his messages to others. Unlike Jesus, Muhammad did not originate his message, but only served as its conduit. The Qur'an is for Muslims the pure Word of Allah. They point to its poetic character as proof that it did not originate with Muhammad, whom they say was illiterate, but with the Almighty, who dictated every word. The average Muslim believes that everything in the book is absolutely true and that its message is applicable in all times and places.

This is a stronger claim than Christians make for the Bible. When Christians of whatever tradition say that the Bible is God's Word, they don't mean that God spoke it word-for-word and that it's free of all human agency — instead, there is the idea of “inspiration,” that God breathed through human authors, working through their human knowledge to communicate what he wished to. But for Muslims, the Qur'an is more than inspired. There is not and could not be a passage in the Qur'an like I Corinthians 1:14-17 in the New Testament, where Paul says: “I am thankful that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius; lest any one should say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any one else.)” Paul's faulty memory demonstrates the human element of the New Testament, which for

Christians does not negate, but exists alongside the texts' inspired character. But in the Qur'an, Allah is the only speaker throughout (with a few notable exceptions). There is no human element. The book is the pure and unadulterated divine word.

Allah himself tells him this, in the Qur'an itself: "This is a mighty scripture. Falsehood cannot reach it from before or from behind" (41:41-2). It is "free from any flaw" (39:28). In short, "it is the indubitable truth" (69:51). Allah, speaking in a royal plural that does not, according to Muslim theologians, compromise his absolute unity, proclaims that "it was We that revealed the Koran, and shall Ourselves preserve it" (15:9). But reading the Qur'an is not always easy. Since so much of it consists of Allah speaking with Muhammad, it is often rather like listening in on a conversation between two people you don't know, talking about events with which you were uninvolved. Even though a surprisingly large amount of what the Qur'an says is said more than once, still often the reader can't figure out what's being said, or why, without reference to Muslim tradition.

Also, it has no overarching narrative unity, although there are smaller narrative units within many chapters. With the exception of the brief first chapter (sura), its 114 chapters are arranged from the longest to the shortest. In the longer chapters, stories are told, laws are given, and warnings to unbelievers are issued, but in them and throughout the book, there is no chronological or narrative continuity. The shorter suras, meanwhile, particularly those near the end of the book that run only a few lines, are poetic and arresting warnings of the impending divine judgment. When I first read the Qur'an and began studying Islam in late 1980 and early 1981, those poetic suras captured my imagination to the extent that I continued reading deeply into other Islamic texts.

I'll refer to Islamic traditions when necessary, as well as to traditional commentaries, to shed light on various passages. And by the end of this journey, I believe we will see more clearly what makes the jihadists tick – and also perhaps understand what we can and must do to resist them.

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 1, "The Opening"

The Fatiha (Opening) is the first sura (chapter) of the Qur'an and most common prayer of Islam. If you're a pious Muslim who prays the five requisite daily prayers of Islam, you will recite the Fatiha seventeen times in the course of those prayers. According to [an Islamic tradition](#), the Muslim prophet Muhammad said that the Fatiha surpassed anything revealed by Allah ("the God" in Arabic, and the word for God used by Arabic-speaking Christians and Jews, as well as Muslims) in the Torah, the Gospel, or the rest of the Qur'an. And indeed, it efficiently and eloquently encapsulates many of the principal themes of the Qur'an and Islam in general: Allah as the "Lord of the Worlds," who alone is to be worshiped and asked for help, the merciful judge of every soul on the Last Day.

In Islamic theology, Allah is the speaker of every word of the Qur'an. Some have found it strange that Allah would say something like "praise be to Allah, Lord of the worlds," but the traditional Islamic understanding is that Allah revealed this prayer to Muhammad early in his career as a prophet (which began in the year 610 AD, when he received his first revelation from Allah through the angel Gabriel - a revelation that is now contained in the [Qur'an's 96th chapter](#)) so that the Muslims would know how to pray.

It is for its last two verses that the Fatiha is of most concern to non-Muslims, and for which it has been in the news lately. A Shi'ite imam, Husham Al-Husainy, ignited controversy by paraphrasing this passage during [a prayer](#) at a Democratic National Committee winter meeting, giving the impression that he was [praying that the assembled pols convert to Islam](#). Then Imam Yusuf Kavakci of the Dallas Central Mosque prayed the Fatiha at the Texas State Senate, [giving rise to the same concerns](#).

The final two verses of the Fatiha ask Allah: "Show us the straight path, the path of those whom Thou hast favoured; not the (path) of those who earn Thine anger nor of those who go astray." The traditional Islamic understanding of this is that the "straight path" is Islam -- cf. Islamic apologist John Esposito's book *Islam: The Straight Path*. The path of those who have earned Allah's anger are the Jews, and those who have gone astray are the Christians.

The classic Qur'anic commentator [Ibn Kathir explains](#) that "the two paths He described here are both misguided," and that those "two paths are the paths of the Christians and Jews, a fact that the believer should beware of so that he avoids them. The path of the believers is knowledge of the truth and abiding by it. In comparison, the Jews abandoned practicing the religion, while the Christians lost the true knowledge. This is why 'anger' descended upon the Jews, while being described as 'led astray' is more appropriate of the Christians."

Ibn Kathir's understanding of this passage is not a lone "extremist" interpretation. In fact, most Muslim commentators believe that the Jews are those who have earned Allah's wrath and the Christians are those who have gone astray. This is the view of Tabari, Zamakhshari, the [Tafsir al-Jalalayn](#), the [Tanwir al-Miqbas min Tafsir Ibn Abbas](#), and Ibn Arabi, as well as Ibn Kathir. One contrasting, but not majority view, is that of Nisaburi, who says that "those who have incurred Allah's wrath are the people of negligence, and those who have gone astray are the people of immoderation."

Wahhabis drew criticism a few years back for adding "such as the Jews" and "such as the Christians" into parenthetical glosses on this passage in Qur'ans printed in Saudi Arabia. Some Western commentators imagined that the Saudis originated this interpretation, and indeed the whole idea of Qur'anic hostility toward Jews and Christians. They found it inconceivable that Muslims all over the world would learn as a matter of course that the central prayer of their faith anathematizes Jews and Christians.

But unfortunately, this interpretation is venerable and mainstream in Islamic theology. The printing of the interpretation in parenthetical glosses into a translation would be unlikely to affect Muslim attitudes, since the Arabic text is always and everywhere normative in any case, and since so many mainstream commentaries contain the idea that the Jews and Christians are being criticized here. Seventeen times a day, by the pious.

Please note that I am not saying that the anti-Jewish and anti-Christian interpretation of the Fatiha is the "correct" one. While I don't believe that religious texts are infinitely malleable and can be made to mean whatever the reader wants them to mean, as some apparently do, in this case Nisaburi's reading has as much to commend it as the other: there is nothing in the text itself that absolutely compels one to believe that it is talking about Jews and Christians. And it is noteworthy that in his massive and evocatively named 30-volume commentary on the Qur'an, *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an* (In the Shade of the Qur'an), the twentieth-century jihad theorist Sayyid Qutb doesn't mention Jews or Christians in connection with this passage. At the same time, however, the idea in Islam that Jews have earned Allah's anger and Christians have gone astray doesn't depend on this passage alone. The Jews have earned Allah's anger by rejecting Muhammad (2:87-[90](#)), and the Christians have gone astray by holding to the divinity of Christ ([5:72](#)).

The Hadith, the traditions of the words and deeds of Muhammad and the early Muslims, also contains material linking Jews to Allah's anger and Christians to his curse, which resulting from their straying from the true path. (The Jews are accursed also, according to Qur'an [2:89](#), and both are accursed according to [9:30](#)). [One hadith recounts](#) that an early Muslim, Zaid bin 'Amr bin Nufail, in his travels met with Jewish and Christian scholars. The Jewish scholar told him, "You will not embrace our religion unless you receive your share of Allah's Anger," and the Christian said, "You will not embrace our religion unless you get a share of Allah's Curse." Zaid, needless to say, became a Muslim.

In light of these and similar passages it shouldn't be surprising that many Muslim commentators have understood the Fatiha to be encapsulating these views.

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 2, "The Cow," verses 1-39

[Sura 2, Al-Baqara](#) ("The Cow"), like almost all of the chapters of the Qur'an, takes its title from something recounted within it – in this case, the story of Moses relaying Allah's command to the Israelites that they sacrifice a cow ([2:67-73](#)). It is the longest sura of the Qur'an – 286 verses – and begins the Qur'an's general (but not absolute) pattern of running from the longest to the shortest chapters, with the exception of the Fatiha, which has pride of place as the first sura because of its centrality in Islam. Surat Al-Baqara, "The Cow," was revealed to Muhammad at Medina – that is, during the second part of his prophetic career, which began in Mecca in 610. In 622 Muhammad and the fledgling Muslim community moved to Medina, where for the first time Muhammad became a political and military leader. Islamic theologians generally regard Medinan suras as taking precedence over Meccan ones wherever there is a disagreement, in accord with [verse 106](#) of this chapter of the Qur'an, in which Allah speaks about abrogating verses and replacing them with better ones. (This interpretation of verse 106, however, is not universally accepted. Some say it refers to the abrogation of nothing in the Qur'an, but only of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. More on that when the time comes.)

Sura 2 contains a great deal of important material for Muslims, and is held in high regard. The medieval Qur'anic commentator Ibn Kathir (whose commentary is still read and respected by Muslims) conveys in an earthy way that recitation of this sura distresses Satan, [recounting](#) that one of Muhammad's early followers, Ibn Mas'ud, remarked that Satan "departs the house where Surat Al-Baqarah is being recited, and as he leaves, he passes gas." Without Ibn Mas'ud's poor taste, [Muhammad himself says](#): "Satan runs away from the house in which Surah Baqara is recited."

The chapter begins with three Arabic letters: alif, lam, and mim. Many chapters of the Qur'an begin with three Arabic letters in this way, which has given rise to a considerable amount of mystical speculation as to what they might mean. But the [Tafsir al-Jalalayn](#), another classic Qur'anic commentary, succinctly sums up the prevailing view: "God knows best what He means by these [letters]."

[The verse immediately following those letters](#) contains a key Islamic doctrine: "This is the Scripture whereof there is no doubt." The Qur'an is not to be questioned or judged by any standard outside itself; rather, it is the standard by which all other things are to be judged. That, of course, is not significantly different from the way many other religions regard their Holy Writ. But there has been no development in Islam of the historical and textual criticism that have transformed the ways Jews and Christians understand their scriptures today. The Qur'an is a book never to be doubted, never to be questioned: when one Islamic scholar, Suliman Bashear, taught his students at An-Najah National University in Nablus that the Qur'an and Islam were the products of historical development rather than being delivered in perfect form to Muhammad, [his students threw him out of the window](#) of his classroom.

[2:1-29](#) is an extended disquisition on the perversity of those who reject belief in Allah, and sounds several themes that will recur many times. The Qur'an, we're told, is guidance to those who believe in what was revealed to Muhammad as well as in "that which was revealed before" him ([v. 4](#)). This involves the Qur'an's oft-stated assumption that it is the confirmation of the Torah and the Gospel, which teach the same message Muhammad is receiving in the Qur'anic revelations (see [5:44-48](#)).

When the Torah and Gospel were found not to agree with the Qur'an, the charge arose that Jews and Christians had corrupted their Scriptures — which is mainstream Islamic belief today. [Muhammad Asad states](#) it positively: "the religion of the Qur'an can be properly understood only against the background of the great monotheistic faiths which preceded it, and which, according to Muslim belief, culminate and achieve their final formulation in the faith of Islam."

Another theme is Allah's absolute control over everything, even the choices of individual souls to believe in him or reject him: "As to those who reject Faith, it is the same to them whether thou warn them or do not warn them; they will not believe. Allah hath set a seal on their hearts and on their hearing, and on their eyes is a veil; great is the penalty they (incur)" ([vv. 6-7](#)). The Qadaris of early Islamic history held that mankind had free will, and was thus capable of choosing to do good or evil. Their opponents maintained that Allah determined everything. While both sides had abundant Qur'anic citations to support their views, eventually Muslim authorities condemned Qadarism as a heresy, as it restricted Allah's absolute sovereignty over all things. Thus those who reject faith do so because Allah wills it, as per these verses, not because they have free choice. [Says Ibn Kathir](#): "These Ayat [verses] indicate that whomever Allah has written to be miserable, they shall never find anyone to guide them to happiness, and whomever Allah directs to misguidance, he shall never find anyone to guide him." (A good brief overview of the Qadari controversy can be found in the renowned Islamic scholar Ignaz Goldziher's [Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law](#).)

Then comes the condemnation of hypocrites and false believers, who frequently bedeviled Muhammad during his career as a prophet ([vv. 13-20](#)). And finally there is the assertion of the sublimity of the Qur'an, such that doubters are challenged to produce a sura like it if they refuse to believe its divine provenance ([v. 23](#)). This is a challenge [many have taken up](#), but of course it is the kind of challenge that can never be successfully met in the eyes of those who issue it – "they could not produce the like thereof" ([17:88](#)).

[2:25](#) introduces the famous gardens of Paradise, wherein the believers shall reside — about which more later.

[2:30-39](#) tells the story of Adam and Eve, in a manner suggesting that the hearers of the recitation are already familiar with the story. Allah tells the angels to prostrate themselves before Adam ([v. 34](#)), a command that appears to depend upon the Biblical notion of mankind's having been created in the image of God, although that idea does not appear here. [According to Ibn Kathir](#), "Allah stated the virtue of Adam above the angels, because He taught Adam, rather than them, the names of everything." Satan refuses to prostrate himself, thereby becoming an unbeliever ([v. 34](#)), and tempts Adam and Eve with the forbidden fruit. Allah promises revelations to guide mankind, warning them that those who ignore these revelations will be punished with hellfire.

Then the sura turns in [verses 40-75](#) to the Children of Israel, who play such an important role in the Qur'an — and, not coincidentally, in the modern Islamic consciousness — that we will devote next week's Qur'an blog to them.

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 2, "The Cow," verses 40-75

[Verse 40](#) of [Sura 2](#) addresses the "Children of Israel," beginning an extended meditation on all that Allah did for the Jews, and the ingratitude with which they repaid him. [Verse 41](#) warns them to "part not with My revelations for a trifling price," which the Islamic commentators generally interpret as an exhortation to put the service of Allah before the concerns of this world. Sayyid Abul A'la Maududi, a renowned twentieth-century Islamic intellectual and exponent of political Islam, says in his massive *Towards Understanding the Qur'an* that this verse "refers to the worldly benefits for the sake of which [the Jews] were rejecting God's directives." However, many have speculated that this verse amounts to Muhammad's rebuke of those who sold him material that they told him was divine revelation, but wasn't – people who are raked over the coals again in [2:79](#).

Anyway, the Jews can get back into good graces with Allah by converting to Islam ([v. 43](#)). This might sail right by the English-speaking reader, since the translations exhort them to "steadfast in prayer" and to "practise regular charity" (as Abdullah Yusuf Ali has it), but in Arabic the word used here for prayer is salat (الصَّلَاة) and for charity zakat (الزَّكَاة); these refer specifically to Islamic prayer and almsgiving. Non-Muslims cannot pray salat or pay zakat. About the need for this conversion [Ibn Kathir is forthright](#): "Allah commanded the Children of Israel to embrace Islam and to follow Muhammad." Sayyid Qutb says that here Allah "invites the Israelites to join the Muslims in their religious practices, and to abandon their prejudices and ethnocentric tendencies."

Starting with [verse 47](#), says Maududi, "reference is made to the best-known episodes of Jewish history. As these episodes were known to every Jewish child, they are narrated briefly rather than in detail. The reference is intended to remind the Jews both of the favours with which the Israelites had been endowed by God and of the misdeeds with which they had responded to those favours." These include the Israelites being rescued from Pharaoh ([vv. 49-50](#)); the golden calf episode ([vv. 54-55](#)), and the feeding of the people with manna and quails in the wilderness ([v. 57, 61](#)), culminating in the avowal that the Jews "were covered with humiliation and misery; they drew on themselves the wrath of Allah. This because they went on rejecting the Signs of Allah and slaying His Messengers without just cause. This because they rebelled and went on transgressing" ([v. 61](#)).

[Ibn Kathir applies](#) these words to all Jews: "This Ayah [verse] indicates that the Children of Israel were plagued with humiliation, and that this will continue, meaning that it will never cease. They will continue to suffer humiliation at the hands of all who interact with them, along with the disgrace that they feel inwardly."

It may seem jarring that immediately following this comes one of the Qur'an's "tolerance verses," [verse 62](#), which seems to promise a place in Paradise to "those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Christians and the Sabians." [Muhammad Asad exults](#): "With a breadth of vision unparalleled in any other religious faith, the idea of 'salvation' is here made conditional upon three elements only: belief in God, belief in the Day of Judgment, and righteous action in life." Not, apparently, acceptance of Islam. But he contradicts himself by adding "in this divine writ" after the words "those who have attained to faith" in his translation of verse 62 – that is, to be saved, one must believe in the Qur'an as well as the earlier revelations. And indeed, Muslim commentators are not inclined to see this as an indication of divine pluralism. The translators [Ali and Pickthall](#), as well as Asad, all feel it necessary to add parenthetical glosses that make the passage mean that Jews and Christians (as well as Sabians, whose identity is disputed) will be saved only if they become Muslims. And according to [Ibn Abbas](#), this verse was abrogated by Qur'an [3:85](#): "If anyone desires a religion other than Islam (submission to Allah), never will it be accepted of him; and in the Hereafter he will be in the ranks of those who have lost (all spiritual good)." Qutb opines that 2:62 applied only before Muhammad brought Islam to the world, a view supported by a saying of

Muhammad recorded by Tabari, in which the Prophet of Islam says that Christians who died before his coming will be saved, but those who have heard of him and yet rejected his prophetic claim will not be.

Then follows the first of the three notorious “apes and pigs” passages. Jihadists today routinely refer to Jews as apes and pigs; this idea is rooted in Qur’an [2:63-66](#); [5:59-60](#); and [7:166](#). The first of these depicts Allah telling the Jews who “profaned the Sabbath”: “Be as apes despicable!” It goes on to say that these accursed ones serve “as a warning example for their time and for all times to come.” Traditionally in Islamic theology these passages have not been considered to apply to all Jews. [Ibn Abbas says](#) that “those who violated the sanctity of the Sabbath were turned into monkeys, then they perished without offspring.” Others, however, such as the early Islamic scholar Ibn Qutaiba, held today’s apes are the descendants of the Sabbath-breaking Jews.

This is widely used today as a metaphor for the Jews’ corruption, even unto bestial status. Muhammad himself began this when he addressed the Jews of the Qurayzah tribe, which he was about to massacre, as “you brothers of monkeys.” Today, the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar, Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, called Jews “the enemies of Allah, descendants of apes and pigs.” The Saudi Sheikh Abd Al-Rahman Al-Sudayyis, imam of the principal mosque in Mecca, the Al-Haraam mosque, expanded on this, saying in a sermon that Jews are “the scum of the human race, the rats of the world, the violators of pacts and agreements, the murderers of the prophets, and the offspring of apes and pigs.” Another Saudi Sheikh, Ba’d bin Abdallah Al-Ajameh Al-Ghamidi, made the connection explicit: “The current behavior of the brothers of apes and pigs, their treachery, violation of agreements, and defiling of holy places... is connected with the deeds of their forefathers during the early period of Islam — which proves the great similarity between all the Jews living today and the Jews who lived at the dawn of Islam.” For more on this, see the [excellent study by the Middle East Media Research Institute](#) (MEMRI).

[Verse 67](#) takes up the reproaches again, with the Israelites reacting with haughty rebelliousness to Allah’s command, given through Moses, that they sacrifice a heifer (the “cow” of the sura’s title). We hear that the Jews’ hearts are hardened ([v. 74](#)) and ultimately that they are accursed of Allah ([v. 89](#)). To that curse and its implications, and other matters extending to [verse 140](#) of sura 2, we will turn next week.

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 2, "The Cow," verses 75-140

The next segment of [Sura 2, verses 75-105](#), continues the Qur'an's criticism of the Jews. When you read statements by Hamas leaders or Mahmoud Ahmadinejad about Israel, remember that they view Israel and Jews through a Qur'anic prism. They have learned, if they have studied the Qur'an at all, that the Jews are the most perverse and guilty – as well as the craftiest and most persistent – enemies of Allah, Muhammad and the Muslims.

In [verse 75](#) Allah asks the Muslims how they can hope that the Jews will come to believe in Islam, since "a party of them used to listen to the word of Allah, then used to change it, after they had understood it, knowingly?" In his *Tafsir Anwar al-Bayan*, the twentieth-century Indian Mufti Muhammad Aashiq Ilahi Bulandshahri notes that some commentators "have mentioned that the verse refers to the adulteration of the Torah. The Jewish scholars used to accept bribes from people to alter certain injunctions to suit their desires." Expanding on this in connection with [verse 79](#), Bulandshahri says that the Jews "commit a dual sin by altering Allah's scripture and by accepting bribery as well." This is a traditional view: the [Tafsir al-Jalalayn](#) says that the Jews "altered the description of the Prophet in the Torah, as well as the 'stoning' verse, and other details, and rewrote them in a way different from that in which they were revealed."

In their arrogance they also think they will only be in hell for a few days ([verse 80](#)). [Bukhari recounts](#) that after Muhammad conquered the Jews of Khaibar, an Arabian oasis, they roasted a sheep for the Prophet of Islam – and poisoned it. Sensing their stratagem, he summoned and questioned them. In the course of this, they told him, "We shall remain in the (Hell) Fire for a short period, and after that you [Muslims] will replace us." Muhammad responded indignantly: "You may be cursed and humiliated in it! By Allah, we shall never replace you in it" and revealed that he knew of their plot to poison him.

[Verses 81-105](#) remind the Jews again of Allah's favors, favors from which most of them "turned back" ([v. 83](#)), and chastise them for their willfulness and disobedience. [Verse 85](#) summarizes their various acts of disobedience, culminating in the assertion that the Jews believe in "only a part" of their sacred writings, and "reject the rest." [Ibn Kathir says](#) that they rejected parts of the Torah, and also: "they should not be believed when it comes to the description of the Messenger of Allah, his coming, his expulsion from his land, and his Hijrah, and the rest of the information that the previous Prophets informed them about him, all of which they hid. The Jews, may they suffer the curse of Allah, hid all of these facts among themselves..." Verses [88](#) and [89](#) emphasize that they are accursed for rejecting Islam. (This is why most Muslims don't accept the idea that the Jews have any right to the land of Israel, despite [5:21](#) and other verses: an accursed people doesn't receive Allah's gifts.) [Verse 98](#) says that their enemy is Allah himself.

[Verses 94-96](#) issue a challenge: if the Jews' claim that Paradise is reserved for them alone, why don't they seek death, instead of being the people "most greedy for life"? This is the foundation of a jihadist taunt, as an Al-Qaeda warrior in Afghanistan put it a few years ago: "The Americans love Pepsi-Cola, we love death." The true believers long for Paradise and disdain this world.

[Verse 106](#) interrupts the condemnations of the Jews to introduce the Islamic doctrine of abrogation, in which Allah replaces what he has previously revealed with "something better or similar." [The Tafsir al-Jalalayn says](#) that this verse was revealed because "the disbelievers began to deride the matter of abrogation, saying that one day Muhammad enjoins his companions to one thing and then the next day he forbids it." [The Tanwîr al-Miqbâs min Tafsîr Ibn 'Abbâs says](#) that it refers to "what was abrogated of the Qur'an and that which was not abrogated." Sayyid Qutb maintains that "partial amendment of rulings in response to changing circumstances during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad could only be in the interest of mankind as a whole." The concept of naskh,

abrogation, is the foundation of the [widespread Islamic understanding](#) that the violent verses of sura 9 take precedence over the more peaceful verses revealed earlier, since they come later in the lifetime of Muhammad – an idea we will return to later. (For a full discussion of the Islamic idea of abrogation, see Ahmad Von Denffer's [‘Ulum al-Qur’an](#).)

[Verses 107-121](#) warns the Muslims to keep up their religious duties and not to allow themselves to be led astray by the Jews and Christians, who will try to deceive the Muslims ([v. 109](#)) even as they fight among themselves ([v. 113](#)). Verses [111](#) and [120](#) (as well as [v. 135](#)) deride Jewish and Christian attempts to proselytize Muslims, and [verse 116](#) marks the first appearance of the oft-repeated rejection of the Christian belief in Jesus as the Son of God. The idea that Allah could have a son is considered to compromise monotheism: “Nay, to Him belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth: everything renders worship to Him.”

[Verses 122-140](#) return to the Jews, reminding them of the covenant Allah made at the Ka’ba in Mecca with Abraham and Ishmael ([v. 125](#)). The Jews are reminded that even as Abraham prayed that Mecca would become a “City of Peace,” Allah answered that “such as reject Faith” would soon taste his “torment of Fire” ([v. 126](#)). If you’re surprised to find a Jewish patriarch, Abraham, linked to an Islamic holy site, the Ka’ba, remember that only the perverse “say that Abraham, Isma’il, Isaac, Jacob and the Tribes were Jews or Christians” ([v. 140](#)). In fact, they were submitters to Allah – Muslims ([v. 128](#)). If they weren’t believers in Muhammad as a prophet, they were at least hanifs: pre-Islamic monotheists.

This underscores the recurring Qur’anic theme that the people we know of today as Jews and Christians are only renegades from the true religion actually taught by Abraham and Moses, as well as Jesus – and that true religion was Islam. As we have seen, much of sura 2 is devoted to addressing the renegade Jews who have rejected Muhammad and calling them back to the true faith, the faith of Abraham and Moses as well as Muhammad. Thus Islam challenges Judaism and Christianity by claiming that the true and original form of both religions is Islam. Today Islamic spokesmen in the West often present the status of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus as Muslim prophets as evidence of Islamic open-mindedness and ecumenical-mindedness. In fact, however, it is only a declaration of the supremacy of Islam and the illegitimacy of Judaism and Christianity.

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 2, "The Cow," verses 141-210

Continuing our tour through "[The Cow](#)," the second and longest sura of the Qur'an, we encounter in [verses 141-150](#) a discussion of the qibla, the direction for prayer. Muslims are directed henceforth to face the sacred mosque in Mecca when they pray ([v. 150](#)), when previously they had joined the Jews in facing Jerusalem. This appears to have come at the end of Muhammad's attempts to convince the Jews that he was a prophet in the line of the Jewish prophets. Only "fools" ([v. 142](#)) protested the change – that is, the Jews: on this identification the relatively moderate commentator Muhammad Asad and the comparative hardliner Mufti Muhammad Aashiq Ilahi Bulandshahri agree. [Asad says](#): "This 'abandonment' of Jerusalem obviously displeased the Jews of Medina, who must have felt gratified when they saw the Muslims praying towards their holy city; and it is to them that the opening sentence of this passage refers." Allah further criticizes the Jews and Christians for following their "vain desires" even though they knew Muhammad's qibla is from Allah ([vv. 144-6](#)).

We saw that in [verse 106](#) Allah announced that when he abrogated a verse, he would replace it with a better one, and that some Muslims believe that refers to things in the Qur'an, and others think it applies only to the Bible's having been superseded by the Qur'an. The change in the qibla has some bearing on this. Ibn Abbas, Muhammad's cousin and an important early Islamic authority, [says that](#) "the first abrogated part in the Qur'an was about the Qiblah." However, there is nothing in the Qur'an directing Muslims to pray facing Jerusalem, so this is an abrogation of an extra-Qur'anic regulation. We'll be returning to abrogation in several contexts later.

Allah presents the new qibla as if it is a gift especially for Muhammad, who will "love" the new direction for prayer ([v. 144](#)). This is one of several passages in the Qur'an that suggest Allah's special solicitude for Muhammad; another example is Allah's gently rebuking him for initially declining to marry his former daughter-in-law when Allah wanted him to do so ([33:37](#)). Such passages have led unbelievers to think that Muhammad was enjoying the personal perks of prophethood, but for Muslims they only underscore Muhammad's special status: the details of his life, and even his desires – in longing to pray facing the Ka'ba – are vehicles through which Allah reveals eternal truths and divine laws. And his example is normative. Muqtedar Khan of the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy [explains](#): "No religious leader has as much influence on his followers as does Muhammad (Peace be upon him) the last Prophet of Islam.... So much so that the words, deeds and silences (that which he saw and did not forbid) of Muhammad became an independent source of Islamic law. Muslims, as a part of religious observance, not only obey, but also seek to emulate and imitate their Prophet in every aspect of life. Thus Muhammad is the medium as well as a source of the divine law."

[Verses 151-157](#) encourage the believers to be steadfast; [verse 158](#) approves of a pre-Islamic practice during the Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca; and [verses 159-177](#) returns to the theme of the perversity of the unbelievers. Those who reject Islam will incur the curses of Allah, the angels, and all mankind ([v. 161](#)), and will dwell in hell ([v. 162](#)). Meanwhile, the burden of the believers is not heavy. They only need abstain from certain foods, including pork ([v. 173](#)). There are among the unbelievers those who stubbornly conceal what they know Allah has revealed ([v. 174](#)). Those who argue about what Allah has revealed in the Qur'an are in "open schism" ([v. 176](#)). [The Tafsir al-Jalalayn says](#) that these are – yet again – the Jews.

[Verses 177-203](#) legislates on various matters: zakat (almsgiving), the Ramadan fast, the Hajj, and jihad. [V. 178](#) establishes the law of retaliation (qisas) for murder: equal recompense must be given for the life of the victim, which can take the form of blood money (diyah): a payment to compensate for the loss suffered. In Islamic law (Sharia) the amount of compensation varies depending on the identity of the victim. *'Umdat al-Salik (Reliance of the Traveller)*, a Sharia manual that Cairo's

prestigious Al-Azhar University certifies as conforming to the “practice and faith of the orthodox Sunni community,” says that the payment for killing a woman is half of that to be paid for a man and for killing a Jew or Christian one-third that paid for killing a male Muslim (o4.9). For an explanation of this, see the Sufi Sheikh Sultanhussein Tabandeh’s statement [here](#).

[Verses 190-193](#) are among the Qur’an’s most important words about jihad warfare. [V. 190](#), “begin not hostilities,” is often invoked today to show that jihad can only be defensive. [Asad says](#) that “this and the following verses lay down unequivocally that only self-defence (in the widest sense of the word) makes war permissible for Muslims.” However, [the Tafsir al-Jalalayn says](#) that this verse was abrogated by [9:1](#), which voids every treaty between the Muslims and nonbelievers. On the other hand, [Ibn Kathir rejects the idea](#) that the verse was abrogated.

What constitutes a defensive conflict? A clue to that comes in [v. 193](#): “And fight them until persecution is no more, and religion is for Allah.” Ibn Ishaq explains that this means that Muslims must fight against unbelievers “until God alone is worshipped.” Says Bulandshahri: “The worst of sins are Infidelity (Kufr) and Polytheism (shirk) which constitute rebellion against Allah, The Creator. To eradicate these, Muslims are required to wage war until there exists none of it in the world, and the only religion is that of Allah.” This conflict would be essentially defensive, against the aggressions of unbelief: if Muslims must fight until unbelief does not exist, the mere presence of unbelief constitutes sufficient aggression to allow for the beginning of hostilities. This is one of the foundations for the supremacist notion that Muslims must wage war against unbelievers until those unbelievers are either converted to Islam or subjugated under the rule of Islamic law, as [9:29](#) states explicitly. As the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad, puts it: “I have been commanded to fight against people, till they testify to the fact that there is no god but Allah, and believe in me (that) I am the messenger (from the Lord) and in all that I have brought. And when they do it, their blood and riches are guaranteed protection on my behalf except where it is justified by law, and their affairs rest with Allah.” Thus one may reasonably assume that if one does not accept him as a prophet, one’s blood and riches are not safe from those who read these words as the words of a messenger from the one true God.

[Verses 204-210](#) warn believers not to doubt, backslide, or follow Islam half-heartedly. Then begin consideration of a number of questions Muhammad’s followers asked him – revealing, among other things, the portentous significance of the phrase “persecution is worse than slaughter” (which also appears in [v. 191](#)). That’s where we’ll pick up next week.

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 2, "The Cow," verses 211-221

When is it permissible to break moral laws? When the Islamic community is being persecuted. That is the impact of the small and easily-overlooked phrase "persecution is worse than slaughter," which appears in Qur'an [2:217](#) (as well as in [2:191](#)).

[Verses 189-242](#) of Sura 2, "The Cow," answer various questions that apparently the Muslims had asked Muhammad, since Allah begins his answers to Muhammad with "They ask you" (vv. [189](#), [215](#), [217](#), [219](#), [220](#), [222](#)). One of these questions was whether or not fighting was permissible during the sacred month, which Allah takes up in [v. 217](#).

Muhammad's first biographer, an eighth-century Muslim named Ibn Ishaq, gives the background of this verse. After the Hijrah, Muhammad's move from Mecca to Medina, the Muslims began raiding caravans of the pagan Quryash – Muhammad's own tribe, which had rejected him. Muhammad himself led many of these raids. These raids served a key economic purpose: keeping the Muslim movement solvent. At one point Muhammad sent one of his most trusted lieutenants, Abdullah bin Jahsh, along with eight other Muslims out with orders to watch for a Quraysh caravan at Nakhla, a settlement not far from Mecca, and "find out what they are doing."

Abdullah and his band took this as an order to raid the Quraysh caravan, which soon came along, carrying leather and raisins. But it was the last day of the sacred month of Rajab, during which, by longstanding Arab custom, fighting was forbidden. This presented them with a dilemma: if they waited until the sacred month was over, the caravan would get away, but if they attacked, they would sin by killing people during the sacred month. They finally decided, according to Ibn Ishaq, to "kill as many as they could of them and take what they had."

On the way home to Medina Abdullah set aside a fifth of the booty for Muhammad. But when they returned to the Muslim camp, Muhammad refused to share in the loot or to have anything to do with them, saying only: "I did not order you to fight in the sacred month." But then Allah revealed [v. 217](#), explaining that the Quraysh's opposition to Muhammad was more offensive in his eyes than the Muslims' violation of the sacred month: the raid was therefore justified: "for persecution is worse than slaughter." Whatever sin the Nakhla raiders had committed in violating the sacred month was nothing compared to the Quraysh's sins. Ibn Ishaq explained this verse: "they have kept you back from the way of God with their unbelief in Him, and from the sacred mosque, and have driven you from it when you were with its people. This is a more serious matter with God than the killing of those whom you have slain."

Once he received this revelation, Muhammad took Abdullah's booty and prisoners. Abdullah was considerably relieved, and asked, "Can we hope that it will count as a raid for which we shall be given the reward of combatants?" Here again Allah answered in a revelation, saying that those who "strive in the way of Allah...have hope of Allah's mercy" ([v. 218](#)). "Strive" here is jahadu (جَاهِدُوا) which is a form of jihad, and "jihad for the sake of Allah" or "jihad in the way of Allah" (جَاهِدُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ) always in Islamic theology refers to jihad warfare, not to more spiritualized understandings of jihad.

[Ibn Kathir](#), following Ibn Ishaq, also recounts this incident, which was a momentous one: good became identified with anything that redounded to the benefit of Muslims, and evil with anything that harmed them, without reference to any larger moral standard. Moral absolutes were swept aside in favor of the overarching principle of expediency. Sayyid Qutb explains that "Islam is a practical and realistic way of life which is not based on rigid idealistic dogma." Islam "maintains its own high moral principles," but only when "justice is established and wrongdoing is contained" — i.e.,

only when Islamic law rules a society — can “sanctities be protected and preserved.” So evidently they need not be before that point.

[Verses 211-216](#) again remind the Jews of all of Allah’s spurned favors toward them ([v. 211](#)) and notes how the unbelievers scoff at the Muslims ([v. 212](#)). [V. 213](#) contains in capsule form the Islamic view of salvation history: Allah sent prophets to the world, and “with them He sent the Book in truth,” and even “the People of the Book” — mainly Jews and Christians — agreed with one another, “except through selfish contumacy.” Then Allah guided the Muslims to the truth about the things the People of the Book disagreed about. [Ibn Kathir explains](#) that they disagreed about the “day of Congregation”: “The Jews made it Saturday while the Christians chose Sunday. Allah guided the Ummah [community] of Muhammad to Friday.” They also disagreed about the direction to face when praying (qiblah), postures of prayer, fasting, and the true religion of Abraham: “The Jews said, ‘He was a Jew,’ while the Christians considered him Christian. Allah has made him a Haniyfan Musliman” — that is, a pre-Islamic monotheist.

[V. 216](#) exhorts the believers to fight, even though they “dislike it.” Maulana Bulandshahri explains the traditional view: “While the Muslims were in Makkah, they were weak and few in number, never possessing the capability nor the divine permission for Jihad (religious war). After migrating to Madinah, they received the order to fight their enemies in defence, as a verse of Surah Hajj [chapter 22 of the Qur’an] proclaims: ‘Permission (to fight) has been granted to those being attacked because they are oppressed’ [[22:39](#)]. Later on the order came to fight the Infidels (kuffar) even though they do not initiate the aggression.” Bulandshahri was a modern-day theologian, but this view of the three stages of development of the Qur’an’s teaching on warfare is found in Ibn Ishaq’s eighth-century work, and in the writings of mainstream Islamic theologians throughout the ages, including Ibn Kathir, Ibn Qayyim, Ibn Juzayy, As-Suyuti, and many others.

[V. 219](#) concerns alcoholic drinks and gambling. Several early authorities — Ibn ‘Umar, Ash-Sha’bi, Mujahid, Qatadah, Ar-Rabi’ bin Anas and ‘Abdur-Rahman bin Aslam — [say](#) it was the first of three verses to be revealed on this subject, and that would mean that the other two would take precedence over it. Here Allah says that there is “some benefit” in alcohol, but in [5:90](#) he says that it is “Satan’s handiwork,” which would rule out the ol’ demon rum as being beneficial at all.

[V. 221](#) forbids Muslims to marry “unbelieving women.” [Ibn Kathir records](#) a large amount of disagreement among Islamic authorities over whether this prohibition applies to Jewish and Christian women, or just to polytheists. However, he notes that there is Ijma’ — consensus — among Islamic jurists that such marriages are allowed, although of course Muslim women are not allowed by any school of Islamic law to marry Jewish or Christian men. In a culture that requires women to be utterly subservient to men, these unequal laws ensure that non-Muslim communities remain subjugated, not enjoying equality of rights or equality of dignity with Muslims.

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 2, "The Cow," verses 222-286

My friend Jeff once told me that he had tried to read the Qur'an many times, but could never get through "The Cow." With this segment, we have after six weeks gotten through "The Cow," the Qur'an's longest chapter. The intention of this series is to discuss the Qur'an *in context*, as I am forever accused of *not* doing, and to illuminate for non-Muslims certain aspects of Qur'anic teaching that impinge upon their lives today, since, as the Canadian columnist [David Warren points out](#), "it is impossible to present the tenets of the Taliban, Al Qaeda, Hamas, or the Muslim Brotherhood on the Sunni side; or of Hezbollah, Iraq's blackshirts, or Iran's revolutionary ayatollahs on the Shia side; as complete aberrations of Islam. They do quote Koran and Hadiths accurately enough, and they evoke a semi-legendary history of armed Jihad and conquest that resonates among unwesternized Muslim listeners."

This use of the Qur'an and Sunnah is, of course, something I have drawn attention to many, many times, and I have repeatedly called upon peaceful Muslims to confront and repudiate this use of their holy texts so as to try to blunt their capacity to inspire violence and supremacism. And as I go through the Qur'an and point out how *Muslim interpreters* understand the various passages, I shall continue to do so. In commenting not on this week's segment but last week's, some blogger accused me of "demonizing Islam." I fail to see how combing through the Qur'an and pointing out how Muslim commentators view its various injunctions can possibly constitute demonization -- if I am relating the material accurately, anything negative in it comes from Muslims, not from me, and if I am not, then please show me where I am wrong (but no one has done so, or can do so). I rather suspect that this has by now simply become the knee-jerk response to anything I do, but those who read what I actually write will not be able to sustain such a view.

[Verses 222-242](#) of the Qur'an's [Sura 2](#), "The Cow," primarily contain various laws for marriage and divorce. Intercourse during menstruation is forbidden ([v. 222](#)). The Jews are behind the revelation of [v. 223](#), according to [a hadith recorded by the Imam Muslim](#) and [many others](#): "the Jews used to say that when one comes to one's wife through the vagina, but being on her back, and she becomes pregnant, the child has a squint" -- or, according to other sources, is cross-eyed. To refute this, [v. 223](#) was revealed: "Your wives are your tilth; go then unto your tilth as you may desire." This verse is also understood as [prohibiting anal sex](#). Qutb says that the use of the word "tilth" (Arabic حَرْثٌ), with its "connotations of tillage and production, is most fitting, in a context of fertility and procreation" -- or, as Maududi puts it, Allah's "purpose in the creation of women is not merely to provide men with recreation." It is also to provide them with children.

The regulations for divorce emphasize that while women "have rights similar to those (of men) over them in kindness," nevertheless "men are a degree above them" ([v. 228](#)). This may be why men can divorce their wives simply by saying, "Talaq" -- I divorce you -- but women may not do this. Such an easy procedure leads to divorces in a fit of pique, followed by reconciliation -- and the Qur'an anticipates this and attempts to head it off by stipulating that a husband who divorces his wife three times cannot reconcile with her until she marries another man and is in turn divorced by him ([v. 230](#)). This has given rise to the phenomenon of "temporary husbands," who marry and divorce thrice-divorced women [at the behest of Islamic clerics even in our own day](#), so that these poor women can then return to their original husbands. This practice has, as one may imagine, [given rise to abuses](#).

Verses [234](#) and [240](#) concern the arrangements men make for their wives in their wills; those interested in the [doctrine of abrogation](#) will note that [Ibn Kathir contends](#) of v. 240 that "the majority of the scholars said that this Ayah (2:240) was abrogated by the Ayah (2:234)."

[Verses 243-260](#) returns to the Children of Israel, referring to several Biblical stories, none in much detail. The Jews refuse to fight after having been commanded to do so ([v. 246](#)) and they rebel at the appointment of Saul as king ([v. 247](#)). If Allah had willed, the nations would have believed the prophets he sent to earth, but this was not his will, although his reasons are left unexplained ([v. 253](#)). According to Islamic scholar Mahmoud Ayoub, [v. 255](#), known as the Throne Verse (Ayat Al-Kursi), is “regarded by Muslims as one of the most excellent verses of the Qur’an. It has therefore played a very important role in Muslim piety.” [The Prophet of Islam, Muhammad, approves](#) of a statement about its power, “Whenever you go to your bed, recite the Verse of ‘Al-Kursi’ (2:255) for then a guardian from Allah will be guarding you, and Satan will not approach you till dawn” and of [another](#) about its being the “greatest verse in the Book of Allah.” Qurtubi reports that “when the Throne Verse was revealed, every idol and king in the world fell prostrate and the crowns of kings fell off their heads,” and recounts a saying by Muhammad in which Allah tells Moses of the many blessings that people will receive if they recite the Throne Verse – another manifestation of the assumption that the People of the Book had at least some of the contents of the Qur’an, but perversely effaced them from their own Scriptures.

Immediately following is the famous statement that “there is no compulsion in religion” ([v. 256](#)). Islamic spokesmen in the West frequently quote it to disprove the contention that Islam spread by the sword, or even to claim that Islam is a religion of peace. According to an early Muslim, Mujahid ibn Jabr, this verse was abrogated by Qur’an [9:29](#), in which the Muslims are commanded to fight against the People of the Book. Others, however, according to the Islamic historian Tabari, say that 2:256 was never abrogated, but was revealed precisely in reference to the People of the Book. They are not to be forced to accept Islam, but may practice their religions as long as they pay the jizya (poll-tax) and “feel themselves subdued” (9:29).

Many see v. 256 as contradicting the Islamic imperative to wage jihad against unbelievers, but actually there is no contradiction because the aim of jihad is not the forced conversion of non-Muslims, but their subjugation within the Islamic social order. [Says Asad](#): “All Islamic jurists (fuqahd’), without any exception, hold that forcible conversion is under all circumstances null and void, and that any attempt at coercing a non-believer to accept the faith of Islam is a grievous sin: a verdict which disposes of the widespread fallacy that Islam places before the unbelievers the alternative of ‘conversion or the sword.’” Quite so: the choice, [as laid out by Muhammad himself](#), is conversion, subjugation as dhimmis, or the sword. Qutb accordingly denies that v. 256 contradicts the imperative to fight until “religion is for Allah” (v. 193), saying that “Islam has not used force to impose its beliefs.” Rather, jihad’s “main objective has been the establishment of a stable society in which all citizens, including followers of other religious creeds, may live in peace and security” – although not with equality of rights before the law, as 9:29 emphasizes. For Qutb, that “stable society” is the “Islamic social order,” the establishment of which is a chief objective of jihad.

In this light verses 256 and 193 go together without any trouble. Muslims must fight until “religion is for Allah,” but they don’t force anyone to accept Allah’s religion. They enforce subservience upon those who refuse to convert, such that many of them subsequently convert to Islam so as to escape the humiliating and discriminatory regulations of dhimmitude — but when they convert, they do so freely. Only at the end of the world will [Jesus, the Prophet of Islam, return and Islamize the world](#), abolishing Christianity and thus the need for the jizya that is paid by the dhimmis. Then religion will be “for Allah,” and there will be no further need for jihad.

[Verses 261-286](#) mainly exhort the believers to charitable giving, and condemn usury ([vv. 275-281](#)) – which is the foundation of the Islamic abhorrence of interest-based banking. V. 282 stipulates that two women are equivalent to one man in giving testimony. [Muhammad explained](#), “This is because of the deficiency of a woman’s mind.” So much for “The Cow.” Next week: the beginning of [Sura 3](#), “The Family of Imran,” and why believers should not take unbelievers as friends and protectors.

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 3, "The Family of Imran," verses 1-32

The Qur'an's third chapter is entitled "The Family of Imran" – that is, Amram, the father of Moses and Aaron (Exodus 6:20), who is mentioned in verses 33 and 35. Like most titles in the Qur'an, this title doesn't denote the sura's theme, but is just a word taken from within the chapter that is simply a means to distinguish it from other chapters. According to Maududi, sura 3, which is a Medinan sura, is "especially addressed" to Jews and Christians as well as to Muslims. It contains, he says, a "continuation of the invitation in Al-Baqarah [sura 2], in which they have been admonished for their erroneous beliefs and evil morals and advised to accept, as a remedy, the Truth of the Quran." Likewise Bulandshahri says that sura 3 is a "talking proof" against the Jews, Christians and idolaters since it addresses them all. It invites them towards the truth and refutes their false beliefs, which includes the blasphemous ideologies concerning Sayyidina [Masters] Isa and Ibrahim [Jesus and Abraham]."

That concern is evident from the beginning of the chapter. V. 3 proclaims that the Qur'an now revealed to Muhammad confirms what was written in the Torah and the Gospel. Ibn Kathir explains that "these Books testify to the truth of the Qur'an, and the Qur'an also testifies to the truth these Books contained, including the news and glad tidings of Muhammad's prophethood and the revelation of the Glorious Qur'an."

This again explains why mainstream Islamic tradition regards the Jewish and Christian Scriptures as corrupted: they don't, after all, confirm what is in the Qur'an, and so Jews and Christians must have dared to alter them – and now "their forgeries deceive them as to their own religion" (v. 24). Asad therefore emphasizes that "it is to be borne in mind that the Gospel frequently mentioned in the Qur'an is not identical with what is known today as the Four Gospels, but refers to an original, since lost, revelation bestowed upon Jesus and known to his contemporaries under its Greek name of Evangelion ('Good Tiding'), on which the Arabicized form Injil is based. It was probably the source from which the Synoptic Gospels derived much of their material and some of the teachings attributed to Jesus. The fact of its having been lost and forgotten is alluded to in the Qur'an in 5:14."

V. 4 says that Allah has now revealed the "Criterion" (Arabic فُرْقَان — furqan), which is, as Ibn Kathir puts it, "the distinction between misguidance, falsehood and deviation on one hand, and guidance, truth and piety on the other hand." According to Qatada and many other Islamic authorities this "criterion" is the Qur'an itself, although others say it refers to all the revealed scriptures – in their uncorrupted form, of course.

The same verse also promises a "heavy doom" to those who reject this guidance. The 20th century Indian Muslim scholar Allama Shabbir Ahmed Usmani sees this as proof that Jesus cannot be divine, for while "God is powerful to vengeance [sic] and punish whenever He deems fit," Jesus "cannot be a sovereign like God because he could not overcome the miscreants who were chasing him to kill."

V. 7 explains that some verses in the Qur'an are clear and some aren't, "such as," says the Tafsir al-Jalalayn, "the opening verses of some sūras," including the opening verse of this one. These are not to be explored too deeply by the Muslims (although they have been): Allah warns that it is only "those in whose hearts is perversity" who "follow the part thereof that is allegorical, seeking discord, and searching for its hidden meanings, but no one knows its hidden meanings except Allah."

Verses 8-27 exhort the believers not to reject faith in Allah, and warn the unbelievers that grievous

punishment awaits them in hell. V. 13 refers to the Battle of Badr, the first great victory for the Muslims, when a small force prevailed against a much larger army of pagan Arabs from Muhammad's Quraysh tribe (they had rejected his prophetic claim). Maududi says that the first thirty-two verses of sura 3 were "probably revealed soon after the Battle of Badr," and this verse says that it was a "sign" when the two armies met; "one was fighting in the cause of Allah, the other resisting Allah." These armies "saw as twice their number," which Ibn Kathir explains: "When the two camps saw each other, the Muslims thought that the idolaters were twice as many as they were, so that they would trust in Allah and seek His help. The idolaters thought that the believers were twice as many as they were, so that they would feel fear, horror, fright and despair." Allah, he says, "gives victory to His believing servants in this life..." That is, the Muslims' victory was due to their obedience to Allah. The reverse is also true, setting a pattern that recurs throughout history: when Muslims suffer, their suffering is ascribed to their being insufficiently Islamic, and the remedy is always more Islam.

V. 19 declares that "the Religion before Allah is Islam" (إِنَّ الدِّينَ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ الْإِسْلَامُ) and that the People of the Book reject it only because of "envy of each other." The Jews and Christians, says Bulandshahri, recognized Muhammad "to be the final Prophet but their obstinate nature prevented them from accepting." V. 20 says that they will be saved if they submit to Allah; Bulandshahri continues: "One cannot force these people to accept, but can merely advise them. Inviting them to accept Islam is the duty of the Muslim."

Verses 28-32 is mainly concerned with warnings of Allah's judgment, but v. 28 warns believers not to take unbelievers as "friends or helpers" (أُولِيَا — a word that means more than casual friendship, but something like alliance), "unless (it be) that ye but guard yourselves against them." This is a foundation of the idea that believers may legitimately deceive unbelievers when under pressure. The word used for "guard" in the Arabic is tuqātan (تُقَاتَةً), the verbal noun from taqiyyatan — hence the increasingly familiar term taqiyya. Ibn Kathir says that the phrase Pickthall renders as "unless (it be) that ye but guard yourselves against them" means that "believers who in some areas or times fear for their safety from the disbelievers" may "show friendship to the disbelievers outwardly, but never inwardly. For instance, Al-Bukhari recorded that Abu Ad-Darda' said, 'We smile in the face of some people although our hearts curse them.' Al-Bukhari said that Al-Hasan said, 'The Tuqyah [taqiyya] is allowed until the Day of Resurrection.'" While many Muslim spokesmen today maintain that taqiyya is solely a Shi'ite doctrine, shunned by Sunnis, the great Islamic scholar Ignaz Goldziher points out that while it was formulated by Shi'ites, "it is accepted as legitimate by other Muslims as well, on the authority of Qur'an 3:28." The Sunnis of Al-Qaeda practice it today.

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 3, "The Family of Imran," verses 33-63

According to Muhammad's first biographer, Ibn Ishaq, the first eighty verses of Sura 3 were revealed after a delegation of Christians came from the Yemeni city of Najran. One of the leaders of this delegation was a bishop, Abu Haritha ibn 'Alqama, who received money, servants, and other favors from "the Christian kings of Byzantium." Abu Haritha, says Ibn Ishaq, knew that Muhammad was a prophet, but refused to accept him for fear of losing the loot that the Byzantines were lavishing upon him.

Ibn Ishaq records that the delegation "differed among themselves in some points, saying [Jesus] is God; and He is the son of God; and He is the third person of the Trinity, which is the doctrine of Christianity." They presented arguments defending these propositions to Muhammad, but he would have none of it. When they told him that they had submitted to God, he responded: "You lie. Your assertion that God has a son, your worship of the cross, and your eating pork hold you back from submission." Allah then revealed much of sura 3, refuting their assertions and giving the world the truth about Jesus and Christianity.

He begins by telling the story of Mary's birth and early life, telling us in v. 35 that her mother was the "wife of Imran" – that is, Amram, the father of Moses and Aaron. This verse, along with 19:28, in which Mary is called "sister of Aaron," has given rise to the charge that Muhammad confused Miriam the sister of Moses with Mary the Mother of Jesus, since the names are identical in Arabic: Maryam (مَرْيَمَ). When confronted about this, Muhammad had a ready answer: "The (people of the old age) used to give names (to their persons) after the names of Apostles and pious persons who had gone before them." However, while this may explain why Mary is called "Sister of Aaron," it doesn't explain why she is clearly depicted here as the daughter of Imran.

In any case, Imran's wife dedicates the child in her womb to the service of Allah (v. 35); when she gives birth, she says of Mary, "I crave Thy protection for her and for her offspring from Satan the outcast" (v. 36). Every child, said Muhammad, is "pricked by the Satan" after he is born – that's why babies cry when they're born. However, Mary and Jesus were preserved from this touch of Satan. Although the child is a female and "the female is not like the male" (v. 36), the wife of Imran fulfills her vow: Mary is dedicated to Allah's service. Bulandshahri says that she went to live in the Temple in Jerusalem, which he calls the Baitul Muqaddas ("Holy House") and, in keeping with the Islamic idea that the original message of all the Jewish prophets was Islam, identifies as a mosque. There Mary is fed miraculously (v. 37).

This story recalls one told in the Protoevangelium of James, a second-century Christian document: in it, Mary's parents, Joachim and Anne, prayed to God for an end to their childlessness, and dedicated the child they subsequently conceived to the Lord in thanksgiving. When Mary was three, she went to live in the Temple, where she was fed by an angel. This is the sort of thing that earned Muhammad the charge that he was just retailing "fables of the men of old" (6:25, 8:31, 16:24, 23:83, 25:5, 27:68, 46:17, 68:15, 83:13), not divine revelation. But Muslims respond that the Qur'an is sorting out the true from the false about Christianity among the revelations that were corrupted by the followers of Jesus.

Vv. 38-41 recount the birth of John the Baptist, hitting the highlights of Luke 1:5-80: angels tell Zechariah he will have a son, he asks how this can be since he is old, and he is rendered unable to speak. Then the Qur'an begins to tell the story of the birth of Jesus, beginning with a reaffirmation of Muhammad's prophethood (v. 44): Ibn Kathir explains that even though Muhammad wasn't present at these events, "Allah disclosed these facts" to him as if he had been an eyewitness.

The angels' announcement of Jesus' birth (vv. 45-6) differs from Gabriel's annunciation in Luke 1:30-35 in several key particulars: in the Qur'an, Jesus is identified as a "word" from Allah and is called "Messiah," but not "Son of the Most High." Muslim exegetes explain that Jesus is Allah's word not in the sense of being divine, as in John 1:1, but because he was created without a human father by Allah's word, as was Adam — as v. 59 explains. In v. 48, we're told that Allah will teach Jesus "the Scripture and wisdom, and the Torah and the Gospel": in the Qur'an, the Gospel is not the news about Jesus, but a book that he is given by Allah. V. 49 recounts several miracles Jesus performed, each one "by Allah's leave." Bulandshahri explains that this clause is repeated in order to emphasize that only by Allah's permission does Jesus perform miracles — since "after witnessing these miracles, especially the raising of the dead, it is possible that a person may consider Sayyidina Isa [Master Jesus] to be Allah himself." One of these miracles involves bringing clay birds to life, which appears in the second-century Infancy Gospel of Thomas.

When the Jews reject Jesus, he gathers disciples who say, "do thou bear witness that we are Muslims" (اشْهَدْ يَا نَبِيَّ مُسْلِمُونَ) (v. 52). And while Jesus' enemies plotted against him, Allah, "the best of schemers" (v. 54), plotted also, revealing that he would cause Jesus "to ascend to Me." This, says Ibn Ishaq, refuted "what they assert of the Jews in regard to his crucifixion" — to which we will return in sura 4, which says that "they slew him not nor crucified" (v. 157).

"This," says v. 62, "is the true account: There is no god except Allah..." — in other words, Jesus is not divine. Allah tells Muhammad in v. 61 to challenge those who believe otherwise: since "knowledge hath come to thee" he should say to dissenters: "Come! Let us gather together, our sons and your sons, our women and your women, ourselves and yourselves. Then let us earnestly pray, and invoke the curse of Allah on those who lie!" According to Ibn Ishaq, when the Christian delegation from Najran heard this, they asked Muhammad for time to confer among themselves. Then one of their leaders told the rest: "O Christians, you know right well that Muhammad is a prophet sent (by God) and he has brought a decisive declaration about the nature of your master. You know too that a people has never invoked a curse on a prophet and seen its elders live and its youth grow up. If you do this you will be exterminated. But if you decide to adhere to your religion and to maintain your doctrine about your master, then take your leave of the man and go home." So they went to Muhammad, declined his challenge, and went home, obstinate renegades confirmed in their rebellion against Allah.

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 3, "The Family of Imran," verses 64-120

Verses 64-120 of the Qur'an's Sura 3, "The Family of Imran," continue to charge that Jews and Christians reject Islam only out of perversity, and call them back to the true faith of Abraham. V. 64 caps the Qur'an's presentation of Christianity in verses 33-63 by calling the People of the Book to accept Islam. This is presented as an invitation to an "agreement": "that we shall worship none but Allah, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside Allah." This would (in the Islamic view) require Christians to reject Christ's divinity, as well as the Jews' and Christians' practice of deifying their "rabbis and monks," which the Tafsir al-Jalalayn mentions in connection with this verse. That charge comes from Qur'an 9:31.

In verses 65-68 Allah rebukes the Jews and Christians for arguing over something about which they "have no knowledge" (v. 66): the religion of Abraham. The Patriarch couldn't have been a Jew or a Christian, says v. 65, because "the Torah and the Gospel were not revealed till after him." In reality, he was a Muslim hanif (حَنِيفًا مُسْلِمًا) (v. 67) – as the Tafsir al-Jalalayn explains: "Abraham in truth was not a Jew, neither a Christian, but he was a Muslim, professing the Oneness of God, and a hanīf, who inclined away from all other religions towards the upright one; and he was never of the idolaters." What's more, Muhammad and the Muslims are "the nearest of kin to Abraham," as Ibn Kathir says: "This Ayah [verse] means, 'The people who have the most right to be followers of Ibrahim are those who followed his religion and this Prophet, Muhammad, and his Companions...'"

Of course, if Abraham was a Muslim, Judaism is completely illegitimate. The Jews (and Christians) are simply renegades from the true faith of their own prophets – which was Islam. And that is the view of Judaism and Christianity that many Muslims have today. V. 69 emphasizes the perversity of some of the Jews and Christians: they wish to lead the Muslims astray, when it is actually they who go astray, rejecting the "signs of Allah" even though they are witnesses of them (v. 70). "Signs" is in Arabic "ayat," which is also the word used for the verses of the Qur'an. Thus this could refer to the delegation of Christians from Najran and/or other Christians and Jews who heard Muhammad recite the Qur'an and still rejected Islam – and, according to Islamic accounts, knew Muhammad was a prophet but didn't want to admit it for selfish reasons. Says Maududi: "This is why the Qur'an repeatedly blames them for maliciously misrepresenting the signs of God which they saw with their own eyes and to which they themselves attested." And they even stooped, as recounted in verses 71-2, to subterfuges to try to turn others away from Islam: "they tell a lie against Allah, and (well) they know it" (v. 75). Among these dirty tricks, they pass off their own words as Holy Scripture (v. 78); some skeptics have speculated that Muhammad himself, seeking information about earlier revelations, was among their victims, before he caught on to the ruse.

Verses 79-80 dismiss as "impossible" the idea that a prophet – clearly Jesus – could have taught that he was divine. He is just a prophet like the other prophets (v. 84), and Allah will accept from no one any religion other than Islam (v. 85). And those who reject the true Faith after accepting it bear "the curse of Allah, of His angels, and of all mankind" (verses 86-7). This refers, says Maududi, to the "Jewish rabbis of Arabia" who acknowledged and then denied Muhammad. Verses 93-4 assert that Jewish dietary laws were invented by the Jews (or Jacob – Israel – himself), and v. 95 calls them to reject what Maududi calls "hair-splitting legalism" and return to the true monotheism of Abraham – i.e., Islam.

V. 96 says that the shrine at Mecca (Bakkah) was the world's first house of worship. It was built, says Ibn Kathir, by Abraham, "whose religion the Jews and Christians claim they follow. However, they do not perform Hajj [Pilgrimage] to the house that Ibrahim built by Allah's command, and to which he invited the people to perform Hajj." The People of the Book "reject the signs [ayat] of Allah" (v. 98) and try to obstruct others on the path of Allah (v. 99). If Muslims listen to these Jews

and Christians who reject Islam, they will become apostates (v. 100). On the Day of Judgment, the faces of the blessed will be white, and those of the damned will be black (v. 106).

On earth, meanwhile, the Muslims are “the best community that hath been raised up for mankind,” while most Jews and Christians are “perverted transgressors” (v. 110). However, the Muslims need not fear, for the Jews and Christians are also cowards: “if they come out to fight you, they will show you their backs” (v. 111). They are covered with shame – “except when under a covenant (of protection) from Allah and from men” (v. 112). This, says Bulandshahri, refers to the non-Muslims’ agreeing “to pay the atonement (Jizya) to the Muslim state, in which case they will be accorded the rights of a Dhimmi.” These rights are not equal to the rights of Muslims: the dhimmis must accept subservience and second-class status (cf. 9:29) in exchange for a guarantee of protection – as long as they do not offend the Muslims.

Now, all of this is not to paint the People of the Book with a broad brush! Some “rehearse the Signs of Allah all night long, and they prostrate themselves in adoration” (v. 113). According to Ibn Ishaq, Ibn Abbas and others, this refers to “the clergy of the People of the Scriptures who embraced the faith” of Islam. But steer clear of those who don’t accept Islam: v. 118, says Ibn Kathir, forbids Muslims from “taking followers of other religions as consultants and advisors,” for even those who are outwardly kind actually hate the Muslims (v. 119-120).

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 3, "The Family of Imran," verses 121-200

Verse 121 begins a discussion of lessons of the Battle of Uhud and the Battle of Badr. At Badr in 624, the Muslims overcame great odds to defeat the pagan Quraysh tribe of Mecca; in a return engagement at Uhud the following year, the pagans defeated the Muslims, and Muhammad was slightly wounded. Allah reminds Muhammad that when he and the Muslims set out for the battle at Uhud, two groups of Muslims almost deserted. They shouldn't have been afraid, for "Allah was their protector," and the believers should trust in him (v. 122). After all, when the Muslims were a "contemptible little force" (v. 123) at Badr, Allah granted them victory. According to Islamic tradition, 313 Muslims defeated a much larger force at Badr, because Allah sent down three thousand angels to fight alongside the Muslims" (v. 124). This is one reason why superior American military might doesn't overawe jihadists today.

According to Ibn Ishaq, when the Quraysh arrived at Badr, nearly a thousand strong, Muhammad cried out to Allah: "O God, if this band perish today Thou wilt be worshipped no more." But shortly later Muhammad told his follower Abu Bakr: "Be of good cheer, O Abu Bakr. God's help is come to you. Here is Gabriel holding the rein of a horse and leading it. The dust is upon his front teeth." Muhammad then strode among his troops and issued a momentous promise — one that has given heart to Muslim warriors throughout the ages: "By God in whose hand is the soul of Muhammad, no man will be slain this day fighting against them with steadfast courage advancing not retreating but God will cause him to enter Paradise." One of the assembled Muslim warriors, 'Umayr bin al-Humam, exclaimed: "Fine, Fine! Is there nothing between me and my entering Paradise save to be killed by these men?" He flung away some dates that he had been eating, rushed into the thick of the battle, and fought until he was killed. Muslim warriors have fought with similar courage throughout history, knowing that if they are victorious they will enjoy the spoils of war (about which there is much discussion in sura 8), and if they are killed they will enjoy Paradise.

And the key to earthly victory is obedience to Allah: "if ye persevere, and keep from evil, and (the enemy) attack you suddenly, your Lord will help you with five thousand angels sweeping on" (v. 125). Verses 126-129 emphasize that the decision of victory or defeat belong to Allah alone.

Verses 130-139 turn to a condemnation of usury, and exhort the Muslims to piety, obedience, and generosity, telling them to ask Allah to forgive their sins. Allah invites the believers to "travel through the earth, and see what was the end of those who rejected Truth" (v. 137). This is one of the foundations of the Islamic idea that pre-Islamic civilizations, and non-Islamic civilizations, are all jahiliyya – the society of unbelievers, which is worthless. V. S. Naipaul encountered this attitude in his travels through the House of Islam. For many Muslims, he observed in *Among the Believers*, "The time before Islam is a time of blackness: that is part of Muslim theology. History has to serve theology." Naipaul recounted that some Pakistani Muslims, far from valuing the nation's renowned archaeological site at Mohenjo Daro, saw its ruins as a teaching opportunity for Islam, recommending that Qur'an 3:137 be posted there as a teaching tool. V. 139 then promises "mastery" to those who are "true in Faith" – as Ibn Kathir puts it, "surely, the ultimate victory and triumph will be yours, O believers." However, according to Ibn Abbas, some of the Muslims at Uhud took this as meaning that the believers would be "elevated" over the unbelievers – whereupon they climbed a mountain and put a group of the Quraysh to flight.

Verses 140-179 take up the question: But why did the Muslims lose at Uhud? It's a test from Allah (v. 141) – a test for both the believers and the hypocrites (vv. 166-7). Did the believers really think they would enter Paradise without Allah testing those who "fought hard" – jahadoo (جَاهَدُوا), waged jihad (v. 142)? Even if Muhammad himself were killed, the Muslims should fight on (v. 144), for no one can die except by Allah's permission (v. 145). Look to the prophets, who didn't waver even "if

they met with disaster in Allah's way" (v. 146). Muslims should not obey the unbelievers (v. 149), for Allah will soon cast terror into their hearts (v. 151).

And indeed, at Uhud the Muslims were about to "annihilate" their enemies when they were distracted: when the Muslim warriors "saw the women fleeing lifting up their clothes revealing their leg-bangles and their legs," they began to cry out, "The booty! O people, the booty!" Disobeying Muhammad's orders, they left their posts to pursue these women – and so Allah allowed the pagans to put the Muslims to flight, as a test (vv. 152-153). The Muslims brought defeat on themselves (v. 165). Verses 154-5 speak of the sorrow of these men after Uhud, and v. 159 commends Muhammad for being lenient with them. Verses 156-158 and 160 restate the proposition that life and death, as well as victory and defeat, are in Allah's hands alone, and thus no one should fear fighting. For those killed in battle are not dead, but are enjoying themselves in the gardens of Paradise (vv. 169-72; see also 136, 163).

According to Ibn Kathir, v. 161 was revealed "in connection with a red robe that was missing from the spoils of war of Badr. Some people said that the Messenger of Allah might have taken it." But this verse exonerated Muhammad: a prophet will not be untrustworthy, or embezzle. And his presence is a great favor from Allah (v. 164).

Verses 173-175 praises those who brushed aside fear and went into battle; "they returned with Grace and bounty from Allah" – that is, spoils of war in this world, and Paradise in the next. The believers are told in verses 176-179 not to be grieved over the unbelievers, who only prosper so that "that they may grow in sinfulness. And theirs will be a shameful doom" (v. 178).

Verses 180-200 excoriate the unbelievers and promise rewards to the believers. Those who claim that "Allah is poor and we are rich" (v. 181) are, according to Ibn Kathir and the Tafsir al-Jalalayn, Asad, Daryabadi, Bulandshahri, and others, the Jews. But hell awaits them, for they killed the prophets (v. 183). The People of the Book threw Allah's covenant away, and "purchased with it some miserable gain! And vile was the bargain they made!" (v. 187). The believers should not envy them, however, even if they prosper, for Allah will send them to hell (vv. 196-197) while the believers enjoy the gardens of Paradise (v. 198). The People of the Book who accept Muhammad as a prophet and do not "sell the Signs of Allah for a miserable gain" will also be rewarded (v. 199). "Signs" here again is *ayat*, the word used for the verses of the Qur'an. V. 200 promises that those who obey Allah will prosper. This idea has led throughout Islamic history to disasters being ascribed to disobedience, with the prescribed remedy being a reassertion of Islamic strictness.

Spencer: Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 4, "Women," verses 1-16

Sura 4, "Women," is another Medinan sura, containing laws for the conduct of women and Islamic family life.

V. 1 says that Allah created men and women from a "single soul." Many Muslims in the West have pointed to this verse as evidence that Islam recognizes the full human dignity of women. [Ayatollah Murtada Mutahhari says](#) that "other religions also have referred to this question, but it is the Qur'an alone which in a number of verses expressly says that woman has been created of the species of man, and both man and woman have the same innate character." He then quotes 4:1. The "single soul" from which mankind was created was Adam's, and while the Biblical story of Eve's creation from Adam's rib is not repeated here, Muhammad refers to it in [a hadith](#) that suggests that while men and women may have the same "innate character," that doesn't mean they are equal in dignity, for women are...crooked: "Woman has been created from a rib and will in no way be straightened for you; so if you wish to benefit by her, benefit by her while crookedness remains in her. And if you attempt to straighten her, you will break her, and breaking her is divorcing her."

V. 3 is the basis for Islamic polygamy, allowing a man to take as many as four wives, as long as he believes he is able to "deal justly" with all of them. For according to the Mishkat Al-Masabih, Muhammad said: "The person who has two wives, but is not just between them, shall appear on the Day of Judgment in such a condition that one half of his body will be collapsing." But of course, justice in these circumstances is in the eye of the beholder. Ibn Kathir says this the requirement to deal justly with one's wives is no big deal, since treating them justly isn't the same as treating them equally: "it is not obligatory to treat them equally, rather it is recommended. So if one does so, that is good, and if not, there is no harm on him."

And as for polygamy, Asad notes that "one might ask why the same latitude has not been given to women as well; but the answer is simple. Notwithstanding the spiritual factor of love which influences the relations between man and woman, the determinant biological reason for the sexual urge is, in both sexes, procreation: and whereas a woman can, at one time, conceive a child from one man only and has to carry it for nine months before she can conceive another, a man can beget a child every time he cohabits with a woman. Thus, while nature would have been merely wasteful if it had produced a polygamous instinct in woman, man's polygamous inclination is biologically justified."

V. 3 goes on to say that if a man cannot deal justly with multiples wives, then he should marry only one, or resort to "the captives that your right hands possess" – that is, slave girls.

Slave girls? Bulandshahri explains the wisdom of this practice, and longs for the good old days: During Jihad (religion war), many men and women become war captives. The Amirul Mu'minin [leader of the believers, or caliph – an office now vacant] has the choice of distributing them amongst the Mujahidin [warriors of jihad], in which event they will become the property of these Mujahidin. This enslavement is the penalty for disbelief (kufr).

He goes on to explain that this is not ancient history:

None of the injunctions pertaining to slavery have been abrogated in the Shari'ah. The reason that the Muslims of today do not have slaves is because they do not engage in Jihad (religion war). Their wars are fought by the instruction of the disbelievers (kuffar) and are halted by the same felons. The Muslim [sic] have been shackled by such treaties of the disbelievers (kuffar) whereby they cannot enslave anyone in the event of a war. Muslims have been denied a great boon whereby every home could have had a slave. May Allah grant the Muslims the ability to escape the tentacles of the

enemy, remain steadfast upon the Din (religion) and engage in Jihad (religion war) according to the injunctions of Shari'ah. Amen!

V. 3 also directs Muslims to “marry women who seem good to you.” Ibn Majah records a tradition in which Muhammad details the qualities of a good wife, including that “she obeys when instructed” and “the husband is pleased to look at her.”

V. 4 requires a husband to give his wife a dowry. Ibn Kathir explains that “no person after the Prophet is allowed to marry a woman except with the required dowry...” However, the wife may choose to free the husband from this obligation: “If the wife gives him part or all of that dowry with a good heart, her husband is allowed to take it...”

Verses 5-14 give rules for inheritance and related matters. V. 11 directs that when an estate is being parceled out, daughters are to receive half the share that sons receive.

Verses 15-16 lay down penalties for sexual immorality. V. 15 prescribes home imprisonment until death (unless “Allah ordain for them some (other) way”) for women found guilty of “lewdness” on the testimony of four witnesses. According to Islamic law, these four witnesses must be male Muslims; women’s testimony is inadmissible in cases of a sexual nature, even in rape cases in which she is the victim. If a woman is found guilty of adultery, she is to be stoned to death; if she is found guilty of fornication, she gets 100 lashes (cf. Qur’an 24:2). The penalty of stoning does not appear in the Qur’an, but Umar, one of Muhammad’s early companions and the second caliph, or successor of Muhammad as leader of the Muslims, said that it was nevertheless the will of Allah: “I am afraid,” he said, “that after a long time has passed, people may say, ‘We do not find the Verses of the Rajam (stoning to death) in the Holy Book,’ and consequently they may go astray by leaving an obligation that Allah has revealed.” Umar affirmed: “Lo! I confirm that the penalty of Rajam be inflicted on him who commits illegal sexual intercourse, if he is already married and the crime is proved by witnesses or pregnancy or confession.” And he added that Muhammad “carried out the penalty of Rajam, and so did we after him.”

V. 16, says the Tafsir Al-Jalalayn, refers to men who commit “a lewd act, adultery or homosexual intercourse.” They are to be punished “with insults and beatings with sandals; but if they repent, of this [lewd act], and make amends, through [good] action, then leave them be, and do not harm them.” However, it adds that this verse “is abrogated by the prescribed punishment if adultery is meant [by the lewd act],” that is, stoning. The Islamic jurist al-Shafi’i, it goes on, requires stoning of homosexuals also, but “according to him, the person who is the object of the [penetrative] act is not stoned, even if he be married; rather, he is flogged and banished.”

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 4, "Women," verses 17-34

Verses 17-28 of Sura 4, "Women," continues with various regulations for marriage and the treatment of women. Verses 17-18 continue the call to repentance in v. 16 by warning that Allah will only accept repentance from those who sinned out of ignorance, and will not look kindly upon deathbed changes of heart. Then v. 19 forbids the inheriting of women against their will, and enjoins men not to treat them harshly in order to get them to forfeit part or all of their dowry – "unless they be guilty of flagrant lewdness." Aisha, Muhammad's favorite wife, recounts according to Mishkat al-Masabih that Muhammad said: "The best of you is he who is best towards his wife, and I am the best towards my wives."

Verses 20-21 continue with these exhortations toward just treatment, telling men that if they have decided to "exchange one wife for another," they must not take back the dowry they have given to the wife who is to be discarded. Verses 22-25 prohibit marriage with various women who are related by blood or marriage.

V. 23 refers to "foster mothers," or more literally "mothers who suckled you," as being among those with whom marriage is forbidden. Men and women who are not related are forbidden by Islamic law to be alone together, but a man and a woman who are forbidden to marry each other – i.e., who are related in some way – can be alone together. Once a woman came to Muhammad and told him that her husband, Abu Hadhaifa, was angry because a freed slave of his, a young man who had reached puberty, "enters our house freely." Muhammad told her: "Suckle him and you would become unlawful for him, and (the rankling) which Abu Hudhaifa feels in his heart will disappear." The woman later reported that it worked: "So I suckled him, and what (was there) in the heart of Abu Hudhaifa disappeared." This directive gained worldwide attention recently when a cleric at Cairo's Al-Azhar University, the most respected authority in Sunni Islam, [recommended](#) that this could solve a problem in the workplace: a man could be alone with, and work with, a woman with whom he was not related, if the woman suckled the man and thereby became his foster mother. After the story got out and Al-Azhar was subjected to international ridicule, [the lecturer who recommended this was suspended](#). Left unaddressed, however, was the root of his recommendation in the [words of Muhammad himself](#).

V. 24 forbids Muslims to marry women who are already married, except slave girls: according to Islamic law, once a woman is captured and enslaved, her marriage is immediately annulled (cf. *'Umdat al-Salik* o9.13). At one point, according to a hadith reported by Sahih Muslim, "the Companions of Allah's Messenger seemed to refrain from having intercourse with captive women because of their husbands being polytheists." So the Companions "asked the Prophet about this matter, and this Ayah [verse] was revealed...Consequently, we had sexual relations with these women." Ibn Kathir says that this verse also prohibits temporary marriage – marriage with a predetermined expiration date, which Shi'ites believe was never prohibited. Meanwhile, men who don't have the money to marry believing women should marry Muslim slave girls (v. 25).

Verses 29-33 contain general moral exhortations, including a prohibition of suicide (vv. 29-30). Is suicide bombing included in this prohibition? The Muslim leaders who justify it say that it isn't, as the object of the action is not to kill oneself, but to kill infidels, and thus is the killing and being killed that is rewarded with Paradise according to Qur'an 9:111. More on that when we get to that verse. V. 31 tells Muslims to avoid the "major sins." Hafidh Dhahabi lists 70 major sins in his Kitab ul-Kaba'ir, beginning with shirk, or associating partners with Allah (i.e., saying Jesus is God's Son), and including black magic, adultery, desertion on the battlefield, drinking alcohol, lying, stealing, pride, misappropriating the booty, spying on others, harming Muslims and speaking ill of them, disobeying one's husband, and making pictures. Other lists add more. Another book, Al Ashba wa al-Nadha'ir, lists offenses such as eating pork, dancing, castrating one's slave, apostasy, playing

chess, masturbation and drug use among the major sins.

Verse 34 tells men to beat their disobedient wives after first warning them and then sending them to sleep in separate beds. This is, of course, an extremely controversial verse, so it is worth noting how several translators render the key word here, **وَاضْرِبُوهُنَّ**, waidriboohunna.

Pickthall: “and scourge them”

Yusuf Ali: “(And last) beat them (lightly)”

Al-Hilali/Khan: “(and last) beat them (lightly, if it is useful)”

Shakir: “and beat them”

Sher Ali: “and chastise them”

Khalifa: “then you may (as a last alternative) beat them”

Arberry: “and beat them”

Rodwell: “and scourge them”

Sale: “and chastise them”

Asad: “then beat them”

Laleh Bakhtiar, in a new translation that has [received wide publicity](#), translates it as “go away from them.” In light of this unanimity among the translators, both Muslim and non-Muslim, this seems difficult to sustain – all of these authorities got the passage wrong until Bakhtiar? But her impulse is understandable, as many Muslims today regard this verse with acute embarrassment. Asad adduces numerous traditions in which Muhammad “forbade the beating of any woman,” concluding that wife-beating is “barely permissible, and should preferably be avoided.”

Unfortunately, however, this is not a unanimous view. Sheikh Syed Mahmud Allusi in his commentary *Ruhul Ma’ani* gives four reasons that a man may beat his wife: “if she refuses to beautify herself for him,” if she refuses sex when he asks for it, if she refuses to pray or perform ritual ablutions, and “if she goes out of the house without a valid excuse.” Also, Muhammad’s example is normative for Muslims, since he is an “excellent example of conduct” (Qur’an 33:21) – and Aisha reports that Muhammad struck her. Once he went out at night after he thought she was asleep, and she followed him surreptitiously. Muhammad saw her, and, as Aisha recounts: “He struck me on the chest which caused me pain, and then said: Did you think that Allah and His Apostle would deal unjustly with you?”

Wife-beating exists in all cultures, but only in Islam does it enjoy divine sanction. [Amnesty International reports](#) that “according to the Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences, over 90% of married women report being kicked, slapped, beaten or sexually abused when husbands were dissatisfied by their cooking or cleaning, or when the women had ‘failed’ to bear a child or had given birth to a girl instead of a boy.”

[Aisha herself said it](#): “I have not seen any woman suffering as much as the believing women.”

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 4, "Women," verses 35-104

After v. 35 recommends arbitration for a quarreling couple, verses 36-42 of Sura 4 enjoin kindness toward relatives, friends, neighbors, and slaves ("what your right hands possess," v. 36), and denounce pride and miserliness.

Then v. 43 tells believers not to come to prayers while drunk. Ibn Abi Hatim says this was revealed because one of the Muslims began to recite sura 109:1-3: "Say: O disbelievers! I do not worship that which you worship; nor do you worship that which I worship." But the leader of prayer was drunk, and so he said: "Say, O disbelievers! I do not worship that which you worship, but we worship that which you worship." 4:43 was revealed shortly thereafter. It was the first stage of the three-stage Qur'anic prohibition of alcohol. First Allah commanded the Muslims not to pray while drunk in this passage; then he told them that alcohol was a "great sin, and some profit, for men" (2:219); and finally there came the revelation that alcohol was "Satan's handiwork" (5:90), and thus to be shunned altogether. The last of these verses is considered to have abrogated the other two. Muhammad himself became quite stern about drunkenness, saying that drunks should be given three chances and then executed: "If he is intoxicated, flog him; again if he is intoxicated, flog him; again if he is intoxicated, flog him; if he does it again a fourth time, kill him."

Verses 44-59 are an invective against the People of the Book in general and the Jews in particular. The Jews "traffic in error" and, and wish that the Muslims would "lose the right path" (v. 44). They "they believe in sorcery and evil, and say to the unbelievers that they are better guided in the (right) way than the believers!" (v. 51). They twist Allah's words, and Allah has "cursed them for their unbelief" — كُفْرِهِمْ, kufrihim, (vv. 46; see also 52).

Says Ibn Kathir: "Allah states that the Jews, may Allah's continued curse fall on them until the Day of Resurrection, have purchased the wrong path instead of guidance, and ignored what Allah sent down to His Messenger Muhammad. They also ignored the knowledge that they inherited from previous Prophets, about the description of Muhammad, so that they may have a small amount of the delights of this life." They are called to accept Islam or face terrible punishment, including being cursed "as We cursed the Sabbath-breakers" (v. 47) — that is, being transformed into apes and pigs (2:63-65). Allah will forgive anything except shirk, the associating of partners with him (v. 48). Because the People of the Book are accursed, they shall soon be "cast into the Fire: as often as their skins are roasted through, We shall change them for fresh skins, that they may taste the penalty" (v. 56).

According to Maududi, in saying that "Allah doth command you to render back your trusts to those to whom they are due," v. 58 warns the Muslims not to make the same mistake the Jews made: "One of the fundamental mistakes committed by the Israelites was that in the time of their degeneration they had handed over positions of trust (i.e. religious and political leadership) to incompetent, mean, immoral, corrupt and dishonest people." Maududi, a foremost exponent of political Islam who was writing in the mid-20th century, is implying that Muslims have gone astray by putting up with authoritarian regimes that do not govern according to Islamic law, rather than implementing full Sharia government. Another 20th century theorist, Sayyid Qutb, writing in a similar vein about the same verse, adds that jihad is "a fulfillment of a specific trust." A third, Maulana Bulandshahri, explains that contemporary governments in Muslim states have betrayed their trust by allowing their "legislative assemblies to make laws" instead of "following the guidelines of the Qur'an and Ahadith."

The believers, meanwhile, are exhorted to "obey Allah, and obey the Messenger, and those charged with authority among you" (v. 59). To obey Muhammad today is, many Islamic authorities say, to

obey his dictates in the Hadith, which some contemporary Muslims wish to disregard and say that only the Qur'an has authority. And Muhammad himself is quite clear about the necessity to obey earthly rulers: "You should listen to and obey your ruler even if he was an Ethiopian (black) slave whose head looks like a raisin." Verses 60-70 continue the theme of obeying Muhammad, chastising the hypocrites who pretend to believe in Muhammad and Islam but refuse to come to him to judge their disputes. Allah tells Muhammad: "by the Lord, they can have no (real) Faith, until they make thee judge in all disputes between them" (v. 65).

Verses 71-104 exhort the believers to go forth courageously to jihad warfare. Ibn Kathir explains v. 71 in this way: "Allah commands His faithful servants to take precautions against their enemies, by being prepared with the necessary weapons and supplies, and increasing the number of troops fighting in His cause." A warrior should fight fearlessly, for "whether he is slain or gets victory" he will be rewarded (v. 74) – here again is the promise that has made Muslims fight with such tenacity throughout history. For the contrast is stark: the believers fight against oppression (v. 75) and for Allah, while the unbelievers fight for Satan (v. 76). One will not escape death by declining to fight, for "all things are from Allah" (v. 78). And in any case, Allah will "restrain the fury of the unbelievers" (v. 84). V. 90 is sometimes adduced as proof that Muslims have no open-ended mandate to fight unbelievers, but the Tafsir al-Jalalayn makes clear that this refers only to unbelievers who submit to Islamic rule: "And so if they stay away from you and do not fight you, and offer you peace, reconciliation, that is, [if] they submit, then God does not allow you any way against them, [He does not allow you] a means to take them captive or to slay them."

Verses 92-3 forbid Muslims to kill fellow believers intentionally; if one kills a Muslim accidentally, he should free a Muslim slave. How is it, then, that Muslims can kill each other with such apparent impunity in Iraq and elsewhere? They pronounce takfir on one another – declare the opposing group to be unbelievers – despite the gentle discouraging of this practice in v. 94. V. 95 says that those believers who stay home and risk no injury are not equal to those who wage jihad.

Passages such as this, which are often overlooked in discussions of the Qur'anic view of jihad, demonstrate definitively that what the Qur'an means by jihad is not an interior spiritual struggle, but warfare. Why should anyone fear death or the fury of the unbelievers, or shorten his prayers in view of an impending attack by the unbelievers (v. 101), in a spiritual struggle? How can one kill a fellow Muslim by accident in a spiritual struggle?

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 4, "Women," verses 104-176

V. 104 of Sura 4 continues the martial theme of the previous section, telling Muslims not to weaken in pursuit of the enemy. Bulandshahri explains: "While the disbelievers (kuffar) will be subjected to the unending torment and distress in the abysses of Hell, the Muslims shall be rejoicing in the bliss and comforts of Heaven (Jannah), without the slightest worries and concerns. The disbelievers (kuffar) cannot aspire for these stages as these are promised exclusively to the Muslims. For this reason the Muslims have a much stronger incentive to fight and should do so with greater zest and zeal."

Verses 105-116 direct Muslims to judge by the Qur'an (v. 105); excoriate hypocrites and warn against sin (vv. 107-112); and remind Muhammad of Allah's protection, telling Muslims to obey him (vv. 113-116). In warning Muslims not to follow any path "other than the believer's way," v. 115 is a principal foundation for the Islamic legal concept of *ijma*, consensus. This is the idea that once the Islamic community has agreed on a matter, it can be sure that Allah has guided it to the truth. Ibn Kathir explains: "the Ummah [community] of Muhammad is immune from error when they all agree on something, a miracle that serves to increase their honor, due to the greatness of their Prophet." Unfortunately, this idea can impede Islamic reform: when the community reaches consensus on an issue, the understanding of it becomes generally fixed. This is true, although few Islamic spokesmen in the U.S. will admit it, of the ideology of Islamic supremacism that mandates warfare against and the subjugation of unbelievers: because this is something that all the schools of Islamic jurisprudence agree on, it will be very hard to dislodge.

Verses 117-122 assail polytheists who "call but upon female deities" and Satan instead of Allah (v. 117). In another affirmation of Allah's absolute control over everything, v. 119 has him leading astray these unbelievers: "I will mislead them, and I will create in them false desires; I will order them to slit the ears of cattle, and to deface the (fair) nature created by Allah." The last clause, according to Al-Hasan bin Abi Al-Hasan Al-Basri, refers to tattooing. Said Muhammad, "Allah has cursed the lady who practices tattooing and that who gets it done for herself, and also the lady who lengthens hair artificially and that who gets her hair lengthened artificially."

Verses 123-126 then promise Paradise to the true believers, both male and female (v. 124). (Paradise, filled with the virginal houris for men – cf. 44:54, etc. – is not described for women.) The statement "Not your desires, nor those of the People of the Book (can prevail)" was revealed, says the Tafsir al-Jalalayn, "when the Muslims and the People of the Scripture began to pride themselves [upon God's promise]." Allah, of course, says Ibn Kathir, "then supported the argument of the Muslims against their opponents of the other religions."

Verses 127-130 return to women. V. 128 speaks of agreements between a husband and a wife. Ibn Abbas recounted that one of Muhammad's wives, Sawdah, "feared that the Messenger of Allah might divorce her." So she said: "O Messenger of Allah! Do not divorce me; give my day to Aisha" – that is, take the night you are scheduled to spend in my bed and spend it instead with one of your other wives. V. 129 says that Muslims will not be able to treat all their wives equally, but Aisha asserts that Muhammad was an exception; he "used to treat his wives equally."

Verses 131-151 emphasize Allah's sovereignty, enjoin justice, criticize the unbelievers (who should not be taken as friends, say verses 139 and 144), and hypocrites, and warn that Allah will not forgive those who leave Islam twice (v. 137). Muhammad's own statement is sharper: "If somebody (a Muslim) discards his religion, kill him." Then Allah criticizes the hypocrites for ridiculing Islam (v. 140) and pretending to support the Muslims while actually opposing them (v. 141). Believers are not to befriend unbelievers (v. 144).

Verses 152-176 return to the enormities of the Jews and the Christians. Those who make no distinction between the prophets of Allah will be rewarded (v. 152). Says Ibn Kathir: “Allah threatens those who disbelieve in Him and in His Messengers, such as the Jews and Christians, who differentiate between Allah and His Messengers regarding faith....The Jews, may Allah curse them, believe in the Prophets, except ‘Isa [Jesus] and Muhammad, peace be upon them. The Christians believe in the Prophets but reject their Final and Seal, and the most honored among the prophets, Muhammad, peace be upon him....Therefore, whoever rejects only one of Allah’s Prophets, he will have disbelieved in all of them, because it is required from mankind to believe in every prophet whom Allah sent to the people of the earth.” After the Jews disobeyed Allah repeatedly, Allah “set the seal on their hearts for their blasphemy” (v. 155). The Jews who are “well-grounded in knowledge” believe in Muhammad and Islam (v. 162).

The Jews boast that they killed Jesus, but “they slew him not nor crucified him, but it appeared so unto them” (v. 157). Ibn Kathir explains: “When Allah sent ‘Isa [Jesus] with proofs and guidance, the Jews, may Allah’s curses, anger, torment and punishment be upon them, envied him because of his prophethood and obvious miracles...” They stirred up “the king of Damascus at that time, a Greek polytheist who worshipped the stars” to order his deputy in Jerusalem to arrest Jesus. Jesus, perceiving this, asked those with him, “Who volunteers to be made to look like me, for which he will be my companion in Paradise?” A young man volunteered, whereupon “Allah made the young man look exactly like ‘Isa, while a hole opened in the roof of the house, and ‘Isa was made to sleep and ascended to heaven while asleep.” Then “those surrounding the house saw the man who looked like ‘Isa, they thought that he was ‘Isa. So they took him at night, crucified him and placed a crown of thorns on his head. The Jews then boasted that they killed ‘Isa and some Christians accepted their false claim, due to their ignorance and lack of reason.” Other sources offer other theories: Wahb bin Munabbah, Qatadah, and Mujahid say that Jesus was with seventy of his disciples when the guards came to arrest him, and all seventy were made to look just like Jesus; one stepped forward and was crucified. The Ruhul Ma’ani identifies the one who was made to look like Jesus and crucified as the one who betrayed him for thirty dirhams — Judas. Allama Baghawi says it was a sentry who was guarding Jesus after his arrest.

The assertion that “there is none of the People of the Book but must believe in him before his death” has been taken to mean that Jesus will return to earth – and when he does, according to Muhammad, he will “break the Cross and kill the pig and abolish the Jizya (a tax taken from the non-Muslims, who are in the protection, of the Muslim government).” That is, he will abolish the subservient dhimmi status of the non-Muslims, and Islamize the world: “During his time, Allah will destroy all religions except Islam and Allah will destroy Al-Masih Ad-Dajjal (the False Messiah).”

Allah warns Christians to remember that Jesus was a created being and not to say “Three” (v. 171) – that is, not to say God is a Trinity. Ibn Kathir echoes the Qur’an itself (5:116) in saying that the Christians elevated Jesus “and his mother to be gods with Allah”; the actual Christian Trinity of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is not envisioned in the Qur’an.

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 5, "The Table," verses 1-60

Sura 5, "The Table," dates from the Medinan period (as do suras 2-4). Verses 1-11 exhort Muslims to obey Allah's commands regarding food, religious observances, and sexual morality. V. 5 permits Muslim men to marry not only "chaste women who are believers, but chaste women among the People of the Book." However, nothing is said of Muslim women being permitted to marry non-Muslim men, and indeed, this is prohibited in Islamic law. This is part of the subjugated status of the dhimmis, the "protected people," in Islam: since traditionally a man takes his wife into his own household, but not vice versa, the prohibition of Muslim women marrying non-Muslim men, but the allowance of Muslim men marrying non-Muslim women, means that the Islamic community will be in a position always to grow, while the non-Muslim community declines.

Verses 12-26 return to castigating the Jews and Christians. Allah, we're told, "did aforetime take a covenant from the Children of Israel" (v. 12), but the Jews broke it. And so they are now cursed by Allah, for they have altered the divine revelations they received, and also because they are deceitful; nonetheless, the Muslims are told here to "forgive them, and overlook (their misdeeds): for Allah loveth those who are kind" (v. 13). According to Allusi in his *Ruhul Ma'ani*, this forgiveness should be extended only to those Jews who become Muslims or agree to pay the *jizya* and accept subservient *dhimmi* status in accord with 9:29. Tabari, on the other hand, suggests that v. 13 was abrogated by the commands to wage jihad against the unbelievers that came later in Muhammad's career.

The Christians, meanwhile, "forgot a part of that whereof they were admonished," so Allah "stirred up enmity and hatred among them till the Day of Resurrection" (v. 14). Thus as far as the Qur'an is concerned, the divisions among Christians demonstrate the falsity of the religion – a proposition for which Jesus stated the obverse: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). Says Ibn Kathir, "Indeed, the numerous Christian sects have always been enemies and adversaries of each other, accusing each other of heresy and cursing each other....Each sect among them will continue to accuse the other of disbelief and heresy in this life and on the Day when the Witnesses will come forth." The Jews and Christians should accept Islam (v. 15).

The Qur'an in several places presents itself as the arbiter between these warring sects, clearing up disputed questions. Thus when asserting that Jesus was not crucified, but someone who looked like him was crucified in his stead (a position held by some Gnostic Christian sects), Allah says "those who disagree concerning it are in doubt thereof; they have no knowledge thereof save pursuit of a conjecture; they slew him not for certain" (4:157). And here the Qur'an declares that those Christians who believe that "Allah is the Messiah, son of Mary" are "unbelievers." Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation says that those who believe this are "in blasphemy," but the Arabic word used here is *kafara*, (كَفَرَ), is a form of *kufr*, unbelief. Of course, in Islam there is a fine line between unbelief and blasphemy in any case, but the passage does refer to unbelief, not blasphemy. It is noteworthy that Islamic spokesmen in the West frequently assert that the Qur'an never refers to Christians as infidels or unbelievers, when in fact this verse is quite clear that those who believe in the divinity of Christ are unbelievers indeed. To those Jews and Christians who claim to be God's children, Muhammad is directed to retort, "Why then doth He punish you for your sins?" (v. 18).

Verses 27-34 retell the story of Cain and Abel, culminating in one of the most oft-quoted verses of the Qur'an, the one that President Bush refers to most frequently: v. 32, which contains the admonition that some who kills a human being, "unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land, it would be as if he slew the whole people: and if any one saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people." Sa'id bin Jubayr explains 5:32 this way: "He who allows

himself to shed the blood of a Muslim, is like he who allows shedding the blood of all people. He who forbids shedding the blood of one Muslim, is like he who forbids shedding the blood of all people.”

Never mentioned by the President or any of the others who quote this verse as if it condemns Islamic jihadist violence are several important facts: it comes within the context of a warning to the Jews, and is not presented as a universal principle; it contains the important exception “unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land,” and it is followed by v. 33, which specifies the punishment for that mischief: “The punishment of those who wage war against Allah and His Messenger, and strive with might and main for mischief through the land is: execution, or crucifixion, or the cutting off of hands and feet from opposite sides, or exile from the land: that is their disgrace in this world, and a heavy punishment is theirs in the Hereafter.”

Thus this passage is explaining what must be done with Jews who reject Muhammad, not dictating lofty moral principles. Ibn Warraq sums it up: “The supposedly noble sentiments are in fact a warning to Jews. ‘Behave, or else’ is the message. Far from abjuring violence, these verses aggressively point out that anyone opposing the Prophet will be killed, crucified, mutilated, and banished!”

Verses 35-40 warn again of hellfire and prescribe amputation of a hand for theft (v. 38). Said Muhammad: “Let there be the curse of Allah upon the thief who steals an egg and his hand is cut off, and steals a rope and his hand is cut off.”

In verses 41-60, Allah consoles Muhammad for the Jews’ and Christians’ rejection of him, and he and his message are again presented as the crown and completion of the messages brought to them by their prophets. But the Christians are told to “judge by what Allah hath revealed therein” (v. 47), which seems to suggest that Muhammad was assuming that the Christian Scriptures were not corrupted in his day, although today it is common Islamic teaching that the New Testament as we have it is not the original, but has been altered by wicked Christians to reflect their false doctrines. Thus Muslims are not to befriend Jews and Christians (v. 51); Ibn Kathir explains: “Allah forbids His believing servants from having Jews and Christians as friends, because they are the enemies of Islam and its people, may Allah curse them.” Verses 52-60 continue in this vein, excoriating the hypocrites and the People of the Book (most of whom are “rebellious and disobedient” – v. 59), reminding them that some of “those who incurred the curse of Allah and His wrath” were “transformed into apes and swine” (v. 60).

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 5, "The Table," verses 61-120

The second half of the Qur'an's fifth sura continues to expound upon the wickedness of the Jews and Christians. Verses 61-86 criticize the Jews and Christians for refusing to follow Muhammad. Why don't the Jews' rabbis stop their evil behavior (v. 63)? They even dare to say that "Allah's hand is fettered" (v. 64).

Allah's hand is fettered? It is unclear what Jewish concept, if any, the Qur'an is referring to in this case. Ibn Kathir comments: "Allah states that the Jews, may Allah's continuous curses descend on them until the Day of Resurrection, describe Him as a miser. Allah is far holier than what they attribute to Him." He is also absolute will, with hand absolutely unfettered: Allah's unfettered hand is a vivid image of divine freedom. Such a God can be bound by no laws. Muslim theologians argued during the long controversy with the heretical Islamic Mu'tazilite sect, which exalted human reason beyond the point that the eventual victors were willing to tolerate, that Allah was free to act as he pleased. He was thus not bound to govern the universe according to consistent and observable laws. "He cannot be questioned concerning what He does" (Qur'an 21:23).

Accordingly, there was no point to observing the workings of the physical world; there was no reason to expect that any pattern to its workings would be consistent, or even discernible. If Allah could not be counted on to be consistent, why waste time observing the order of things? It could change tomorrow. Stanley Jaki, a Catholic priest and physicist, explains that it was the renowned Sufi thinker al-Ghazali who "denounced natural laws, the very objective of science, as a blasphemous constraint upon the free will of Allah." The great twelfth-century Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides explained orthodox Islamic cosmology in similar terms, noting that Islamic thinkers of his day assumed "the possibility that an existing being should be larger or smaller than it really is, or that it should be different in form and position from what it really is; e.g., a man might have the height of a mountain, might have several heads, and fly in the air; or an elephant might be as small as an insect, or an insect as huge as an elephant. This method of admitting possibilities is applied to the whole Universe."

Relatively early in its history, therefore, science was deprived in the Islamic world of the philosophical foundation it needed in order to flourish. It found that philosophical foundation only in Christian Europe, where it was assumed that God was good and had constructed the universe according to consistent and observable laws. Such an idea would have been for pious Muslims tantamount to saying, "Allah's hand is fettered."

Verse 64 also says that whenever the Jews "kindle the fire of war, Allah doth extinguish it." That is, says the Tafsir al-Jalalayn, "war against the Prophet(s)." According to Bulandshahri, "The Jews make every effort to instigate wars against the Muslims, but Allah foils their attempts each time, either by instilling terror in their hearts or by their defeat in these battles." The Jews also "strive to do mischief on earth" – that is, *fasaad* (فَسَاد) – for which the punishment is specified in v. 33: "they will be killed or crucified, or have their hands and feet on alternate sides cut off, or will be expelled out of the land."

Verses 66, 68 and 69 exhort the Jews and Christians to follow what is written in the Torah and Gospel, and promises Paradise to those who do so. This is not (as it is often represented) a manifestation of ecumenical generosity, but rather an expression of the Qur'an's assumption that it confirms the message of the earlier books, which prophesied Muhammad's coming. Ibn Kathir tells Jews and Christians that they will have "no real religion until you adhere to and implement the Tawrah [Torah] and the Injil [Gospel]. That is, until you believe in all the Books that you have that Allah revealed to the Prophets. These Books command following Muhammad and believing in his

prophecy, all the while adhering to his Law.”

V. 72 repeats the denial of the divinity of Christ – and the labeling of those who believe in it as “unbelievers” – of v. 17, and v. 73 repeats the denial of the doctrine of the Trinity from 4:171. Jesus and his mother are again presented as the other members of the divine trio with Allah, but they were mortal: they both used to eat earthly food (v. 75) – “like all other human beings,” says the Tafsir al-Jalalayn, and one who is such cannot be a god because of his compound being and fallible nature, and because of the [impurities such as] urine and excrement that he produces.” The actual Christian concept of the Incarnation, with Christ being both fully God and fully human, doesn’t enter into consideration.

Meanwhile, for their part the disbelieving Jews are cursed by both David and Jesus for their disobedience (v. 78). The Muslims will find that these Jews are their fiercest enemies, while those closest to them in affection will be the Christians (v. 82). According to the Ma’alimut Tanzil, this verse doesn’t refer to all Christians, but only to those who accept Islam; this is made clear by verses 83 and 84, in which those Christians accept Muhammad’s message.

Verses 87-108 establish various regulations for the Muslims. Among them is the directive that one who breaks an oath must in expiation feed ten indigents or free a slave (v. 88). Verses 90-91 say that alcohol and gambling are “Satan’s handiwork” – and thus definitively forbidden. Muslims are warned in verses 101-102 not to “ask questions about things which, if made plain to you, may cause you trouble. But if ye ask about things when the Qur’an is being revealed, they will be made plain to you, Allah will forgive those.” However, “some people before you did ask such questions, and on that account lost their faith.” Which may explain [the touchiness of some imams when asked questions](#).

Verses 109-120 return to Jesus, emphasizing his status as a prophet of Allah, who did all his mighty works by order of Allah – and is thus not God himself. The miracle of the clay birds becoming live ones (v. 110) is found in the second-century Gnostic text the [Infancy Gospel of Thomas](#). It’s likely that Gnostics had left the Eastern Roman Empire, where they faced persecution, and settled in Arabia. Verses 112-115 give the chapter its name, recounting when Jesus asked Allah for a table laden with food from heaven, which would be “a solemn festival and a sign from thee” (v. 114). This appears to be a vestige of the Christian Eucharist: the consuming of the Body and Blood of Christ in the form of bread and wine, which was central to all Christian groups in Muhammad’s time. In v. 116, Allah asks Jesus directly: “O Jesus, son of Mary! Didst thou say unto mankind: Take me and my mother for two gods beside Allah?” Jesus, of course, denies having done so. Those who believe otherwise will be punished.

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 6, "Cattle," verses 1-83

The Qur'an's sixth sura, "Cattle," dates from Muhammad's last year in Mecca, before the Hijra, or Flight, to Medina during the twelfth year of his prophetic career. In Medina he became for the first time a political and military leader as well as a religious one; at Mecca, he had been solely a preacher of his new and uncompromising monotheism, in an atmosphere of increasing antagonism with his own tribe, the Quraysh, who were pagans and polytheists. Sura 6 is preoccupied with that antagonism, and features, among imprecations against the unbelievers, Allah speaking to Muhammad to console him for the Quraysh's rejection of his message.

Verses 1-12 reaffirm that the unbelievers have rejected the truth of their Creator. Allah warns: "See they not how many of those before them We did destroy?" (v. 6). Allah mocks their unbelief, saying that if he had sent Muhammad a "a written message on parchment," the unbelievers would have dismissed it as "obvious magic" (v. 7), and if he had sent an angel in the form of a man, they would have just been confused (v. 9). Nothing will satisfy them: they are inherently perverse.

Then verses 13-32 emphasize the oneness of Allah, and claim that "those to whom We have given the Book" – that is, the Jews and Christians – "know this" – that is, the truth of Muhammad's message – "as they know their own sons" (v. 20). This is because, says Ibn Kathir, "they received good news from the previous Messengers and Prophets about the coming of Muhammad, his attributes, homeland, his migration, and the description of his Ummah." That is, their unbelief in Islam is not a sincere rejection based on honest conviction, but sheer perversity: they "lie against their own souls" (v. 24).

And there is nothing worse than this. Nothing. Allah asks, "Who doth more wrong than he who inventeth a lie against Allah or rejecteth His signs?" (v. 21). "Signs," once again, is *ayat*, the name used for the verses of the Qur'an. This verse emphasize that there can be no greater sin than shirk, the association of partners with Allah. The Tafsir al-Jalalayn asks, "And who, that is, none, does greater evil than he who invents a lie against God, by ascribing to Him an associate, or denies His signs?"

There is no greater evil. In 1997 the ["Invitation to Islam" newsletter asserted](#):

Murder, rape, child molesting and genocide. These are all some of the appalling crimes which occur in our world today. Many would think that these are the worst possible offences which could be committed. But there is something which outweighs all of these crimes put together: It is the crime of shirk.

Some people may question this notion. But when viewed in a proper context, the fact that there is no crime worse than shirk, will become evident to every sincere person.

There is no doubt that the above crimes are indeed terrible, but their comparison with shirk shows that they do not hold much significance in relation to this travesty. When a man murders, rapes or steals, the injustice which is done is directed primarily at other humans. But when a man commits shirk, the injustice is directed towards the Creator of the heavens and the earth; Allah. When a person is murdered, all sorts of reasons and explanations are given. But one thing that the murderer cannot claim, is that the murdered was someone who provided him with food, shelter, clothing and all the other things which keep humans aloft in this life.

Yet those who commit this worst of all sins are still doing so because Allah has "thrown veils on their hearts," so that they do not understand Muhammad's message (v. 25). Hellfire awaits them (vv. 26, 30).

Muslims should be careful not to value the things of this world, for “What is the life of this world but play and amusement?” (v. 32). Says the *Tanwîr al-Miqbâs min Tafsîr Ibn ‘Abbâs*, “Do you not comprehend that this world is evanescent and that the Hereafter is everlasting?”

Many do not. In verses 33-73 Allah consoles Muhammad for the unbelievers’ rejection of his message: “We know indeed the grief which their words do cause thee” (v. 33), but they are “deaf and dumb” (v. 39), and wouldn’t believe even if they witnessed great miracles (vv. 35, 37). The fact that Allah, in a perfect book that has existed from all eternity, is so solicitous of his prophet and concerned about his grief at being rejected, is for pious Muslims only further confirmation of Muhammad’s importance and exalted status. Allah’s solicitude for Muhammad became the springboard for an exaltation of Muhammad in the Islamic mystical tradition. The Persian Sufi mystic Mansur Al-Hallaj (858-922) said that Allah “has not created anything that is dearer to him than Muhammad and his family.” The Persian poet Rumi (Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi, 1207-1273) said that the scent of roses was that of the sweat of the Prophet of Islam:

Root and branch of the roses is the lovely sweat of Mustafa [that is, Muhammad], And by his power the rose’s crescent grows now into a full moon.

Likewise a modern Arab writer opined that Allah “created Muhammad’s body in such unsurpassable beauty as had neither before him nor after him been seen in a human being. If the whole beauty of the Prophet were unveiled before our eyes, they could not bear its splendor.”

In verses 40-49 Allah discusses how he has sent messengers all over the world, warning of punishment to those who disbelieve. Verses 50-58 instruct Muhammad to issue various warnings to the unbelievers. Verses 59-69 emphasizes Allah’s absolute sovereignty, with v. 59 making a succinct statement of his omniscience: “And with Him are the keys of the Invisible. None but He knoweth them. And He knoweth what is in the land and the sea. Not a leaf falleth but He knoweth it, not a grain amid the darkness of the earth, naught of wet or dry but (it is noted) in a clear record.” (Similarly, “We have neglected nothing in the Book,” v. 38, is believed by some Islamic interpreters to refer to the *Lawhul Mahfuz*, the Protected Tablet, on which Allah has written everything that occurs in the universe, even the minutest actions of animals and birds.) Allah tells Muhammad to “leave alone those who take their religion to be mere play and amusement, and are deceived by the life of this world” (v. 70).

Then verses 74-83 depict Abraham rejecting polytheism by noting the deficiencies of various pagan objects of worship: the stars, the moon, the sun. Those who glibly associate Allah with the moon-god – a pre-Islamic Arabian god of war – should note v. 77: “When he saw the moon rising in splendour, he said: ‘This is my Lord.’ But when the moon set, he said: ‘unless my Lord guide me, I shall surely be among those who go astray.’”

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 6, "Cattle," verses 84-165

Sura 6, "Cattle," verses 84-90 expand upon the immediately preceding discussion of Abraham's rejection of idolatry by enumerating the other prophets of Islam (remember, Abraham was a Muslim according to Qur'an 3:67): Noah before Abraham, then Abraham's children Isaac and Jacob, and then after that David, Solomon, Job, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, Zechariah, John the Baptist, Jesus, Elijah, Ishmael, Elisha, Jonah, and Lot. These are, of course, all Biblical figures, although we shall see later on that the Qur'an does discuss some prophets who don't appear in the Bible. Nevertheless, the Qur'an situates Muhammad as the crown and perfection of the Biblical prophetic tradition, explaining the differences between what Jews and Christians understand Abraham, Moses, Jesus and the rest to have said and what Muslims believe they said to the Christian corruption of their own scriptures.

Verses 91-103 emphasize the oneness of Allah, and the dependence of all creation upon him. Verse 91 begins this with yet another accusation that the Jews are not obeying the revelations given to Moses: they display it ("make it into separate sheets for show") but they don't obey it (they "conceal much of its contents"). Allah chastises those who say that he has not revealed anything to any human being. According to As-Suyuti's *Ad-Durrul Manthur*, this verse was revealed after Muhammad teased a "hefty" Jewish scholar named Malik bin Sayf. Muhammad asked him, "Did you see in the Torah that Allah detests a hefty scholar?" Malik bin Sayf was enraged and shouted: "By Allah! Allah has not revealed anything to any human being!" His outburst is quoted, and rebuked, in verse 91.

The Qur'an is the "most blessed book," confirming previous revelations. It also equips Muhammad to warn the "Mother of Villages" – that is, Mecca – of the impending judgment upon those who do not accept Islam (v. 92) and "invent a lie against Allah" (v. 93). Everyone will appear before Allah alone on the Day of Judgment, with no help from family or friends (v. 94). Verses 95-103 contain a stirring meditation on how Allah makes all things grow, sends the rain, and oversees all things: "No vision can grasp Him, but His grasp is over all vision: He is above all comprehension, yet is acquainted with all things" (v. 103). (لَا تُدْرِكُهُ الْأَبْصَارُ وَهُوَ يُدْرِكُ الْأَبْصَارَ وَهُوَ اللَّطِيفُ الْخَبِيرُ) A beautiful verse in any language. V. 101 attempts a *reductio ad absurdum* on the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation: "How can He have a son when He hath no consort?" Ibn Kathir asks: "How can He have a wife from His creation who is suitable for His majesty, when there is none like Him How can He have a child? Then Verily, Allah is Glorified above having a son." The idea that fatherhood and sonship might not be conceived of in physical terms is not considered.

In verses 104-117 Allah tells Muhammad to "turn aside from those who join gods with Allah" (v. 106), for "had Allah willed, they had not been idolatrous," and it's not Muhammad's problem: "We have not set thee as a keeper over them, nor art thou responsible for them" (v. 107). The Muslims should not revile the gods of the unbelievers, lest the unbelievers revile Allah (v. 108); according to As-Suyuti's *Lubabun Nuqul*, Allah revealed this verse in response to an actual incident, when the pagans responded to the Muslims' denigration of their gods by denigrating Allah. Every prophet has enemies – devils who are both humans and jinn (v. 112). The jinn (from which comes the English "genie") are spirit beings who can see humans, but humans cannot see them. The messengers from Allah have come to them also (v. 130).

Verses 118-121 tell Muslims not to eat meat unless Allah's name has been pronounced over it; this is the foundation for the halal preparation of meat, which dictates that the jugular vein, windpipe and foodpipe of the animal be severed after the butcher recites "In the name of Allah." Then the blood is drained out. The Muslims would be "pagans" if they obeyed the advice of unbelievers in this matter (v. 121). According to Ibn Kathir, this means that "when you turn away from Allah's

command and Legislation to the saying of anyone else, preferring other than what Allah has said, then this constitutes Shirk.” (Shirk, of course, is the greatest sin of all, the associating of partners with Allah.) This is one reason why democracy has had such difficulty taking root in Islamic countries.

Verses 122-134 return to the perversity of the unbelievers who demand signs from Allah but wouldn’t believe even if they received them. Whether or not someone becomes a Muslim depends entirely upon whether Allah wills to lead him to Islam or to lead him astray (v. 125). By following the “straight path” (v. 126) of Islam, Muslims will make Allah their friend (v. 127). Verses 128-131 address jinns as well as humans, warning them of the same Judgment. Ibn Jarir and Dhahak say that jinn prophets were sent to the jinn; however, Mujahid and Ibn Jurayj contend that the jinn listened to the human prophets. This is the more common view.

Verses 135-145 criticize various pagan practices, notably the sacrifice of children (verses 137, 140). “Be not prodigal” (v. 141) refers, says Ibn Jurayj, to over-enthusiasm in charity: “This Ayah was revealed concerning Thabit bin Qays bin Shammas, who plucked the fruits of his date palms. Then he said to himself, ‘This day, every person who comes to me, I will feed him from it.’ So he kept feeding (them) until the evening came and he ended up with no dates.” Others, however, maintain that it simply directs Muslims not to be wasteful in general. Verses 142-144 forbid various pagan customs regarding the usage of animals.

Then verses 146 and 147 detail the specifics of Jewish food laws. Allah tells Muhammad that if the Jews accuse him of lying about this, he should respond: “Your Lord is full of mercy all-embracing; but from people in guilt never will His wrath be turned back.” Ibn Kathir observes that “Allah often joins encouragement with threats in the Qur’an.”

The sura ends with a final appeal to the unbelievers in verses 148-165. According to Ibn Mas‘ud, verses 151-153, a summary of what is prohibited in Islam, constitute “the will and testament of the Messenger of Allah on which he placed his seal.” One should not kill, since Allah has made life sacred, “except by way of justice and law” (v. 151). What does that mean? Muhammad explained that the “blood of a Muslim...cannot be shed except in three cases: in Qisas [retaliation] for murder, a married person who commits illegal sexual intercourse and the one who reverts from Islam (apostate) and leaves the Muslims.” So adultery, apostasy and revenge are the only justifications for taking a life. Verses 153 and 161 repeat that Islam is the straight path.

Allah will “try you in the gifts He hath given you” (v.165). Muhammad explained this also: “Verily, this life is beautiful and green, and Allah made you dwell in it generation after generation so that He sees what you will do. Therefore, beware of this life and beware of women, for the first trial that the Children of Israel suffered from was with women.”

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 7, "The Heights," verses 1-102

Sura 7, "The Heights," is another Meccan sura, dating from around the same time as sura 6: Muhammad's last year in Mecca before the Hijra to Medina. It begins, as do several other chapters, with a first verse consisting of mysterious Arabic letters – the meaning of which, we're told, is known only to Allah. Then follows Allah telling Muhammad not to doubt the Qur'an, for it is "a Book revealed unto thee, so let thy heart be oppressed no more by any difficulty on that account" (v. 2). Verses 3-10 contain yet another warning of the dreadful judgment, when those whose good deeds outweigh their evil deeds will enter Paradise, while those who "wrongfully treated Our signs" – that is, ayat, or verses of the Qur'an – will be condemned. Allah reminds Muhammad of cities he has destroyed for their disobedience (v. 4).

Then comes the story of Satan (verses 11-25). It begins with the creation of Adam, and Allah's command that the angels prostrate themselves before this new creation. Muhammad informs us that when Allah created Adam, he made him 60 cubits tall – that is, about 90 feet. "People," he said, "have been decreasing in stature since Adam's creation." However, Muhammad also tells us that the first inhabitants of Paradise will be Adam's size: "The first group of people who will enter Paradise, will be glittering like the full moon and those who will follow them, will glitter like the most brilliant star in the sky. They will not urinate, relieve nature, spit, or have any nasal secretions. Their combs will be of gold, and their sweat will smell like musk. The aloes-wood will be used in their centers. Their wives will be houris. All of them will look alike and will resemble their father Adam (in statute), sixty cubits tall." The houris, of course, are the fabled virgins of Paradise.

Satan refused to prostrate himself before Adam (v. 11; we also saw this in 2:34). When Allah asks him why, he answers pridefully: "I am better than he: Thou didst create me from fire, and him from clay" (v. 12). Ibn Kathir explains that Satan was wrong about this. Satan, he says, "lost hope in acquiring Allah's mercy" because "he committed this error, may Allah curse him, due to his false comparison. His claim that the fire is more honored than mud was also false, because mud has the qualities of wisdom, forbearance, patience and assurance, mud is where plants grow, flourish, increase, and provide good. To the contrary, fire has the qualities of burning, recklessness and hastiness. Therefore, the origin of creation directed Shaytan [Satan] to failure, while the origin of Adam led him to return to Allah with repentance, humbleness, obedience and submission to His command, admitting his error and seeking Allah's forgiveness and pardon for it." Allah banishes Satan – from Paradise, according to most commentators – but allows respite, which Satan then says he will use to spend his time tempting the Muslims away from the straight path (vv. 16-17).

What exactly is Satan? That's unclear. Verse 11 groups him among the angels, as does 2:34; 15:28-31; 20:116; 38:71-74. However, 18:50 says "he was one of the jinns." The angels "resist not Allah in that which He commandeth them, but do that which they are commanded" (66:6). Many of the jinns, however, "have hearts wherewith they understand not, eyes wherewith they see not, and ears wherewith they hear not. They are like cattle, nay more misguided: for they are heedless (of warning)" (7:179). This creates a difficulty. If Satan is an angel, how can he disobey Allah? But if he is a jinn, why is he blamed in sura 7 and its cognate passages for disobeying a command Allah gave not to the jinns, but to the angels? This has led to some ingenious explanations throughout Islamic history. The Tafsir Al-Jalalayn says Satan was "the father of the jinn, who was among the angels." Muhammad Asad identifies the jinns with the angels (see also here), but this contradicts the passages of the Qur'an that say the angels are not disobedient. The contemporary Islamic apologist [Dr. Zakir Naik](#) contends that while Satan is grouped with the angels, he is never actually called an angel, and so there is no contradiction. He says that Satan is nevertheless held responsible for disobeying a command that is addressed to the angels because Allah meant it collectively — all the angels as well as Satan should obey it. [The strains of this interpretation are many.](#)

Verses 19-25 recount the temptation of Adam and Eve, their sin, and their banishment from the garden. Then verses 26-41 then warn the Children of Adam to heed the commands and signs (ayat) of Allah, and to avoid sin. Verses 42-50 recount a conversation between the “Companions of the Garden” and the “Companions of the Fire.” The Companions of the Garden will point out that Allah’s promises have proven true (v. 44); the Companions of the Fire will ask for “water or anything that Allah doth provide for your sustenance,” but the Companions of the Garden will reply: “Both these things hath Allah forbidden to those who rejected Him” (v. 50). Verses 51-58 remind believers to acknowledge and obey Allah.

Then come in verses 59-95 some stories of other prophets: Noah (vv. 59-64); the extrabiblical figures Hud (vv. 65-72) and Salih (vv. 73-79); Lot (vv. 80-84); and another extrabiblical prophet, Shu’aib (vv. 85-95). These stories all follow the same pattern: the prophets warn the people to whom they are sent in language much like Muhammad’s, and they are scorned in rejected in much the same way that Muhammad was by those who are characterized in the Qur’an as hypocrites and unbelievers. For example, Shu’aib tells the arrogant people of the Madyan that he and the Muslims would “invent a lie against Allah if we returned to your ways after Allah hath rescued us therefrom” (v. 89) – just as earlier Allah says to the Children of Adam: “Who is more unjust than one who invents a lie against Allah or rejects His Signs?” (v. 37). Lot’s story bears traces of the Sodom and Gomorrah incident in the Bible, as Lot tells his people: “Do ye commit lewdness such as no people in creation (ever) committed before you? For ye practise your lusts on men in preference to women: ye are indeed a people transgressing beyond bounds” (v. 81). Verses 96-102 warn again of the destruction that will come to towns that reject Allah. For “there came indeed to them their messengers with clear (signs): but they would not believe what they had rejected before. Thus doth Allah seal up the hearts of those who reject faith” (v. 101).

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 7, "The Heights," verses 103-206

Sura 7 continues the accounts of the prophets with the longest of all these accounts, in verses 103-171: the story of Moses and his people. It begins with a retelling of the story of Moses and Pharaoh, told in a way that suggests that the hearers have heard it before: for example, we see Moses telling Pharaoh to "send the Children of Israel with me" (v. 105), but it is assumed that the reader will know that the Israelites were at this time oppressed as slaves in Egypt. Moses performs various miracles before Pharaoh, as in the Biblical account – although when Moses' hand becomes "white to all beholders" (v. 108), Ibn Abbas says this was "not because of leprosy," which is contrary to Exodus 4:6. The Ruhul Ma'ani says that Moses' hand shone brighter than the sun. But Pharaoh, as in the Biblical story, is unimpressed. But Pharaoh's magicians are, and when they profess belief in "the Lord of the Worlds, the Lord of Moses and Aaron" (vv. 121-122), Pharaoh threatens to cut off their hands and feet on opposite sides and crucify them (v. 124) – the same punishment Allah prescribes for those who wage war against Allah and Muhammad (5:33). The magicians pray that Allah will "take our souls unto thee as Muslims" (مُسْلِمِينَ, v. 126) in another reminder that the Qur'an treats the Biblical prophets all as prophets of Islam, whose messages were later corrupted to create Judaism and Christianity.

As Pharaoh threatens Moses and his people, Moses tells them that "It may be that your Lord is going to destroy your adversary and make you viceroys in the earth, that He may see how ye behave" (v. 129) – and of course, the Jews fail the test. Allah does indeed destroy their adversary: he sends plagues upon the Egyptians, again enumerated as if the hearers are already familiar with the story: "wholesale death, locusts, lice, frogs, and blood" (v. 133), drowns Pharaoh's men in the sea (v. 136), and makes the Jews, "the folk who were despised," the inheritors of "the eastern parts of the land and the western parts thereof which We had blessed" (v. 137). But the Jews, encountering idolaters in their new land, immediately turn to idolatry themselves (v. 138). Moses goes up on Mount Tur (28:46) to converse with Allah and receive laws, which the Qur'an does not enumerate, on stone tablets (v. 145). Moses' people, meanwhile, are worshipping the "image of calf" (v. 148).

Moses prays for Allah's forgiveness (v. 155), and Allah promises mercy to "for those who do right, and practise regular charity, and those who believe in Our signs" (v. 156). Charity is zakat (زكاة), Islamic charity, and signs ayat (آيات), the word used for verses of the Qur'an – again indicting that Allah shows mercy to those who are Muslims. Underscoring this is the further elaboration that Allah shows mercy to "those who follow the messenger, the Prophet who can neither read nor write, whom they will find described in the Torah and the Gospel (which are) with them" (v. 157). This is, of course, Muhammad, whom Muslims contend was prophesied and described in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures before they were corrupted. Says Ibn Kathir: "This is the description of the Prophet Muhammad in the Books of the Prophets. They delivered the good news of his advent to their nations and commanded them to follow him. His descriptions were still apparent in their Books, as the rabbis and the priests well know." The rabbis and priests well know: here again is the Islamic belief that the Jews and Christians, or at least their leaders, know that Muhammad is a true prophet, but obstinately refuse to accept him; they aren't rejecting him in good faith.

It is Muhammad who "commands them what is just and forbids them what is evil; he allows them as lawful what is good (and pure) and prohibits them from what is bad (and impure)" (v. 157). This is one of the foundations for the belief in the hadith, the traditions of Muhammad's words and deeds: Muslims are told to follow what Muhammad commands, and only in the hadith can those commands be discovered.

Among the Jews “there is a section who guide and do justice in the light of truth” (v. 159), but “the transgressors among them” altered their Scriptures: they “changed the word from that which had been given them so we sent on them a plague from heaven” (v. 162). They disregarded Allah’s command to observe the Sabbath, whereupon he transformed them into “apes, despised and rejected” (v. 166) and “broke them up into sections on this earth” (v. 168).

Verses 172-206 warn against idolatry and the perils of rejecting Allah. Everyone on earth is born Muslim (v. 172), as Muhammad also says in a hadith: “No child is born but has the Islamic Faith, but its parents turn it into a Jew or a Christian.” In another hadith, Allah produces all of the multitudes of the children of Adam from his back and asks them, “Am I not your Lord?” (Alastu Bi Rabbikum). All affirm that he is. Therefore, says Bulandshahri, “none will be able to claim that he had no knowledge of the fact that Allah is his Lord.” This is another reason why some Muslims often assume that non-Muslims are dealing in bad faith: they know the Qur’an is true and Muhammad is a prophet, but refuse to acknowledge it.

Allah tells Muhammad to recite the story of a man to whom Allah gave revelations but he rejected them (v. 175). This is, according to Abdullah bin Mas’ud, a reference to the story of Bal’am, a Jew who received revelations but abandoned them. This appears to be Balaam, the reluctant prophet of Numbers 22:2-24:25.

Allah has created a large number of men and jinns for hell, for their “having hearts wherewith they understand not, and having eyes wherewith they see not, and having ears wherewith they hear not.” Indeed, they’re entirely bestial: “These are as the cattle - nay, but they are worse!” (v. 179). The believers, on the other hand, shall guide mankind with Allah’s truth and establish justice by means of it (v. 181). Muhammad is not insane (v. 184) and has no knowledge of the unseen world. He is just a messenger (v. 188). Allah alone protects people and can help them; idols can do nothing (v. 197). Allah tells Muhammad to “Hold to forgiveness; command what is right; But turn away from the ignorant” (v. 199). According to Abdur-Rahman bin Zayd bin Aslam, “Allah commanded [Prophet Muhammad] to show forgiveness and turn away from the idolators for ten years. Afterwards Allah ordered him to be harsh with them.” As we shall soon see.

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 8, "Booty," verses 1-30

Speaking of the assertion that [Islam is a Religion of Peace](#), which all good Brown University students know is axiomatically true, despite the cascades of Qur'an verses and claims of Islamic purity that shower upon us on a regular basis courtesy Osama bin Laden and his ideological kin, here is some evidence of the fact. In this installment of my Blogging the Qur'an series, I discuss the first thirty verses of Sura 8, "Booty," in which Muhammad confronts the forces of the pagan Quraysh at Badr and...turns the other cheek! Exhorts his followers to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them! And begins a Gandhi-esque nonviolent protest!

Sura 8, Al-Anfal — "Booty," or "The Spoils of War" — dates from the second year of the Medinan period, the second part of Muhammad's prophetic career. It was revealed not long after the Battle of Badr, the first great victory of the Muslims over their chief rivals of the time, the pagan Quraysh tribe. The title of this sura is better known than most, since Saddam Hussein [used Al-Anfal as the name](#) for his genocidal 1988 campaigns against the Kurds, in which between 50,000 and 100,000 people were murdered.

At Badr, the Quraysh came out to meet Muhammad's three hundred men with a force nearly a thousand strong. Muhammad had provoked the battle by sending his men out to raid a Quraysh caravan, telling them: "This is the caravan of Quraysh carrying their property, so march forth to intercept it, Allah might make it as war spoils for you." As the battle loomed, according to Muhammad's earliest biographer, Ibn Ishaq, the Islamic prophet strode among his troops and issued a momentous promise — one that has given heart to Muslim warriors throughout the ages: "By God in whose hand is the soul of Muhammad, no man will be slain this day fighting against them with steadfast courage advancing not retreating but God will cause him to enter Paradise." One of the Muslim warriors, 'Umayr bin al-Humam, exclaimed: "Fine, Fine! Is there nothing between me and my entering Paradise save to be killed by these men?" He flung away some dates that he had been eating, rushed into the thick of the battle, and fought until he was killed.

The Quraysh were routed. Some Muslim traditions say that Muhammad himself participated in the fighting; others that it was more likely that he exhorted his followers from the sidelines. In any event, it was an occasion for him to avenge years of frustration, resentment, and hatred toward his people who had rejected him. One of his followers later recalled a curse Muhammad had pronounced on the leaders of the Quraysh: "The Prophet said, 'O Allah! Destroy the chiefs of Quraish, O Allah! Destroy Abu Jahl bin Hisham, 'Utba bin Rabi'a, Shaiba bin Rabi'a, 'Uqba bin Abi Mu'ait, 'Umaiya bin Khalaf (or Ubai bin Kalaf).'" All these men were captured or killed during the battle of Badr. Ibn Ishaq says that one Quraysh leader named in this curse, 'Uqba, pleaded for his life: "But who will look after my children, O Muhammad?" In the confrontation, 'Uqba had thrown camel dung, blood, and intestines on the Prophet of Islam, to the great merriment of the Quraysh chieftans, while Muhammad prostrated himself in prayer. Muhammad had pronounced a curse on them, and now it was being fulfilled. Who would care for 'Uqba's children? "Hell," Muhammad declared, and ordered 'Uqba killed.

The victory at Badr was the turning point for the Muslims. It became the stuff of legend, a cornerstone of the new religion. And Allah rewarded those to whom he had granted victory. Verses 1-4 praise the true believers, who follow the Islamic rules concerning prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, and address for the first time the question of the spoils of war from Badr. There was great booty for the victors — so much, in fact, that it became a bone of contention. Muhammad was receiving questions about the disposal of the booty, and Allah tells the Muslims that that is entirely up to Muhammad (v. 1). This was in accord with a special privilege that Allah had granted to Muhammad. Muhammad explained: "I have been given five (things) which were not given to any amongst the Prophets before me." These included the fact that "Allah made me victorious by awe

(by His frightening my enemies)” and “the booty has been made Halal (lawful) to me (and was not made so to anyone else).”

Verses 5-17 refer to various incidents that took place before and during the battle, emphasizing that Allah commands warfare and protects the believers in it. The true believers were willing to go out of their homes to wage jihad warfare, although some disliked doing so and disputed with Muhammad about having to do so (vv. 5-6). This echoes 2:216: “Fighting is prescribed for you, and ye dislike it. But it is possible that ye dislike a thing which is good for you, and that ye love a thing which is bad for you.” Allah’s promise of “one of the two enemy parties” (v. 7) means, according to Ibn Kathir, that the Muslims would attain victory by either “confiscating the caravan or defeating the Quraysh army.”

Allah announced that a thousand angels joined the Muslims to smite the Quraysh (v. 9), and that he had “inspired the angels (with the message): ‘I am with you: give firmness to the Believers: I will instill terror into the hearts of the Unbelievers: smite ye above their necks and smite all their fingertips off them’” (v. 12). The Tafsir Al-Jalalayn explains: “that is, [smite] the extremities of their hands and feet: thus, when one of them went to strike an disbeliever’s head, it would roll off before his sword reached it.” V. 12 became one of the chief justifications for the Islamic practice — then and now — of beheading hostages and war captives. At the beheading of American hostage Nicholas Berg in May 2004, for example, the now-dead Iraqi jihad leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi [invoked the great battle](#): “Is it not time for you [Muslims] to take the path of jihad and carry the sword of the Prophet of prophets?... The Prophet, the most merciful, ordered [his army] to strike the necks of some prisoners in [the battle of] Badr and to kill them.... And he set a good example for us.”

Allah sent angels against the Quraysh “because they contended against Allah and His Messenger: If any contend against Allah and His Messenger, Allah is strict in punishment” (v. 13). The Muslims must always advance, never turning their backs on the enemy, unless they do so as a stratagem of war (vv. 15-16). Allah tells Muhammad that the Muslims were merely passive instruments at Badr. At one point, according to Ibn Ishaq, Muhammad threw pebbles toward the Quraysh, exclaiming: “Foul be those faces!” But it was Allah who killed the Quraysh and even Allah who threw the pebbles, “in order that He might test the believers by a gracious trial from Himself: for Allah is He Who heareth and knoweth (all things)” (v. 17).

Verses 18-19 address the unbelievers, warning the Quraysh not to attempt another attack, telling them they will again be defeated no matter how much more numerous they are than the Muslims. Verses 20-30 then address the Muslims again, exhorting them to faith and reminding them how Allah gave them victory at Badr despite the enemy’s superior numbers (v. 26). The unbelievers may plot and plan, but “Allah is the best of plotters” (v. 30).

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 8, "Booty," verses 31-75

Verses 31-40 of Sura 8 discuss the perversity of the pagan Quraysh, whom the Muslims have just defeated in the Battle of Badr. They reject Muhammad's preaching as "tales of the ancients" (v. 31) and keep the Muslims out of the Sacred Mosque in Mecca (v. 34). In verses 38-40, Allah tells Muhammad to call them to accept Islam, "and fight them on until there is no more tumult or oppression [fitnah], and there prevail justice and faith in Allah altogether and everywhere; but if they cease, verily Allah doth see all that they do" (v. 39).

According to Ibn Abbas, Abu Al-'Aliyah, Mujahid, Al-Hasan, Qatadah, Ar-Rabi' bin Anas, As-Suddi, Muqatil bin Hayyan and Zayd bin Aslam, the statement that Muslims must fight until there is no more fitnah means that they must fight "so that there is no more Shirk." Shirk is the association of partners with Allah – i.e., calling Jesus the Son of God. So this verse, although it was revealed in the aftermath of a seventh-century battle between Muslims and pagans, has a universal application: the Tafsir al-Jalalayn glosses it this way: "And fight them until sedition, idolatry, is, exists, no more and religion is all for God, alone, none other being worshipped..." Muhammad himself said: "I have been commanded to fight against people so long as they do not declare that there is no god but Allah, and he who professed it was guaranteed the protection of his property and life on my behalf except for the right affairs rest with Allah."

Verses 41-44 concern the battle itself. After the Muslims' victory, Allah directs the Muslims to give a fifth of the booty to Muhammad (v. 41). After one battle, Muhammad prayed "facing a camel from the war booty," and then, holding some of the camel's hair between his fingers, said to his men: "This is also a part of the war booty you earned. Verily, I have no share in it, except my own share, the fifth designated to me. Even that fifth will be given to you." That indicated, according to the one telling this tale, the prophet's generosity. Muhammad continued by exhorting the Muslims to turn over all the spoils of war to him for just distribution: "Therefore, surrender even the needle and the thread, and whatever is bigger or smaller than that (from the war spoils). Do not cheat with any of it, for stealing from the war booty before its distribution is Fire and a shame on its people in this life and the Hereafter. Perform Jihad against the people in Allah's cause, whether they are near or far, and do not fear the blame of the blamers, as long as you are in Allah's cause. Establish Allah's rules while in your area and while traveling. Perform Jihad in Allah's cause, for Jihad is a tremendous door leading to Paradise. Through it, Allah saves (one) from sadness and grief."

Then Allah reminds Muhammad of various events before and during the battle, emphasizing how Allah controlled events and saved the Muslims (vv. 42-44).

Verses 45-63 address the believers, telling them not to imitate those who, like the "people of Pharaoh...rejected the Signs of Allah" (v. 52). (Here again, "signs" is *ayat*, the word used for the verses of the Qur'an.) For "the worst of beasts in the sight of Allah are those who reject Him: they will not believe" (v. 55) — another indication that unbelievers are worthy of no respect or consideration. If the Muslims "fear treachery" from unbelievers with whom they have a treaty, they should simply break the treaty (v. 58). Ibn Kathir says this means that Muslims should tell the unbelievers "that you are severing the treaty. This way, you will be on equal terms, in that, you and they will be aware that a state of war exists between you and that the bilateral peace treaty is null and void." The Muslims should "make ready your strength to the utmost of your power, including steeds of war, to strike terror into (the hearts of) the enemies, of Allah and your enemies" (v. 60), while being ready to make peace if the enemy wishes to do so (v. 61). Some however, do not believe this truce should be indefinite in length. Qutb explains:

At the time when this surah was revealed, God instructed His Messenger to remain at peace with those groups who refrained from fighting him and the Muslims, whether they entered into a formal

treaty with the Muslims or not. The Prophet continued to accept a peaceful relationship with unbelievers and people of earlier revelations until Surah 9 was revealed, when he could only accept one of two alternatives: either they embraced Islam or paid jizyah [a tax levied on non-Muslims, per Qur'an 9:29] which indicated a state of peace. Otherwise, the only alternative was war, whenever this was feasible for the Muslims to undertake, so that all people submit to God alone.

Verses 64-75 address Muhammad himself, giving him various instructions. Allah tells him that he will give pious Muslims more victories, even if they face odds even more prohibitive than those they had overcome at Badr, although this promise is almost immediately backtracked: originally a hundred would defeat a thousand unbelievers (v. 65), but this is almost immediately reduced to a hundred believers vanquishing two hundred unbelievers (v. 66). These became recurring themes of jihad literature throughout the centuries, up to the present day: piety will bring military victory, and the Muslims will conquer even against overwhelming odds.

According to the Tafsir al-Jalalayn, verse 67 – “It is not for any prophet to have captives until he hath made slaughter in the land” — was revealed when the Muslims “ransomed those taken captive at Badr.” The Muslims had released some of the prisoners at Badr, but this was out of their base desire for material gain: the money they would receive in ransom. The tafsir continues: “You, O believers, desire the transient things of this world, its ephemeral gains, by ransoming, while God desires, for you, the Hereafter, that is, its reward, through your killing them.” In other words, they should have killed the captives rather than ransoming them. However, the Tafsir al-Jalalayn concludes by asserting that v. 67 was abrogated by 47:4, which allows for ransom. Ibn Kathir notes that “the majority of the scholars say that the matter of prisoners of war is up to the Imam. If he decides, he can have them killed, such as in the case of Bani Qurayzah. If he decides, he can accept a ransom for them, as in the case of the prisoners of Badr, or exchange them for Muslim prisoners.”

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 9, "Repentance," verses 1-5

Sura 9, "Repentance," is the only one of the Qur'an's 114 chapters that does not begin with Bismillah ar-Rahman ar-Rahim – "In the name of Allah, the compassionate, the merciful." Explanations for this vary. The caliph 'Uthman (and others, including Zamakhshari) explains that it was because some believed that sura 8 and sura 9 were actually one sura, and that "the holy prophet passed away without informing us whether Surah Bara'ah [sura 9] was part of Surah Anfal [sura 8] or not." Ibn Kathir says that the omission is simply "because the Companions did not write it in the complete copy of the Qur'an (Mushaf) they collected." Maududi asserts that the correct explanation was given by Imam Razi, who says that the Bismillah was left off because Muhammad himself didn't recite it at the beginning of this sura. Al-Hakim says that Muhammad not only didn't recite the Bismillah himself, but commanded that it not be recited at the beginning of this sura.

Why not? The Tafsir al-Jalalayn explains Muhammad's command by saying that the Bismillah "is security, and [sura 9] was sent down when security was removed by the sword. 'Ali ibn Abi Talib agrees, saying that the Bismillah "conveys security while this sura was sent down with the sword. That is why it does not begin with security." The Tafsir al-Jalalayn adds that "Hudhayfa reports that they called it the Sura of Repentance, while it is, in fact, the Sura of Punishment."

The prohibition, in any case, remains. Scholars such as Jazari and Shatbi say that the Bismillah should not be recited at the beginning of this sura, although Bulandshahri says that if someone recites sura 9 starting from anywhere other than its beginning, he may recite the Bismillah if he chooses to do so.

According to a hadith recorded by Bukhari, sura 9 was the last to be revealed as a whole, although part of another sura came later. Another hadith says that sura 110 was actually the last, but in any case sura 9 is very late, among the last revelations Muhammad received. It came around the time of an inconclusive expedition Muhammad undertook against a Byzantine garrison at Tabuk in northern Arabia in 631, and much of its contents revolve around the events of that attempt to engage the army of the great Christian empire in battle.

It begins, however, by addressing the pagans of Mecca. Verses 1-12 free the unbelievers from all obligations they may have incurred in treaties they concluded with the Muslims, and all existing treaties are restricted to a period of four months (vv. 1-3).

This restriction comes with the warning that "Allah will cover with shame those who reject Him" (v. 2), which the Tafsir al-Jalalayn explains as "humiliating them in this world by having them killed, and in the Hereafter, by [sending them to] the Fire." The announcement is made during the Hajj that "Allah and His Messenger dissolve (treaty) obligations with the Pagans" and call them to repent and accept Islam (v. 3). This refers only to those pagans who have violated the terms of their treaties with the Muslims; the other treaties will be honored to the end of their term (v. 4). As-Sawi says that this is an exception to the four-month limit, giving to the Damra tribe, "who still had nine months of their treaty remaining."

Then comes the notorious Verse of the Sword, containing the injunction to "slay the unbelievers wherever you find them (v. 5). This is, understandably, a verse much beloved by present-day jihadists. In a 2003 sermon, [Osama bin Laden rejoiced over this verse](#): "Praise be to Allah who revealed the verse of the Sword to his servant and messenger [the Prophet Muhammad], in order to establish truth and abolish falsehood."

Ibn Juzayy notes that v. 5 abrogates "every peace treaty in the Qur'an," and specifically abrogates 47:4's directive to "set free or ransom" captive unbelievers. According to As-Suyuti, "This is an

Ayat of the Sword which abrogates pardon, truce and overlooking” – that is, perhaps the overlooking of the pagans’ offenses. The Tafsir al-Jalalayn says that the Muslims must “slay the idolaters wherever you find them, be it during a lawful [period] or a sacred [one], and take them, captive, and confine them, to castles and forts, until they have no choice except [being put to] death or [acceptance of] Islam.”

Ibn Kathir echoes this, directing that Muslims should “not wait until you find them. Rather, seek and besiege them in their areas and forts, gather intelligence about them in the various roads and fairways so that what is made wide looks ever smaller to them. This way, they will have no choice, but to die or embrace Islam.” He also doesn’t seem to subscribe to the view commonly put forward by Muslim spokesmen in the West today — that this verse applies only to the pagans of Arabia in Muhammad’s time, and has no further application. He asserts, on the contrary, that “slay the unbelievers wherever you find them” means just that: the unbelievers must be killed “on the earth in general, except for the Sacred Area” – that is, the sacred mosque in Mecca, in accord with 2:191.

If the unbelievers convert to Islam, the Muslims must stop killing them. The Tafsir al-Jalalayn: “But if they repent, of unbelief, and establish prayer and pay the alms, then leave their way free, and do not interfere with them.” Ibn Kathir: “These Ayat [verses] allowed fighting people unless, and until, they embrace Islam and implement its rulings and obligations.” Qutb says that the termination of the treaties with a four-month grace period, combined with the call to kill the unbelievers, “was not meant as a campaign of vengeance or extermination, but rather as a warning which provided a motive for them to accept Islam.”

Asad, however, says that v. 5 “certainly does not imply an alternative of ‘conversion or death,’ as some unfriendly critics of Islam choose to assume.” He says that “war is permissible only in self-defence,” in accord with 2:190, and that “the enemy’s conversion to Islam...is no more than one, and by no means the only, way of their ‘desisting from hostility.’” He points the reader to verses 4 and 6 for further elucidation; we will pick up with v. 6 next week.

Finally, it is noteworthy that, according to As-Suyuti, the jurist “Ash-Shafi’i took this as a proof for killing anyone who abandons the prayer and fighting anyone who refuses to pay zakat [alms]. Some use it as a proof that they are kafirun [unbelievers].” Likewise Ibn Kathir: “Abu Bakr As-Siddiq used this and other honorable Ayat as proof for fighting those who refrained from paying the Zakah.” Thus even Muslims who do not fulfill Islamic obligations fall into the category of those who must be fought. This is a principle that latter-day Salafist movements apply broadly and use frequently in branding governments that do not rule according to strict Islamic law as unbelievers who must be fought by those who regard themselves as true Muslims. This is playing out now in the Salafist revolt against Musharraf’s Pakistan, and to a lesser degree in Egypt against Mubarak and even in Saudi Arabia against the House of Saud.

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 9, "Repentance," verses 6-14

According to the twentieth century Islamic scholar Muhammad Asad, verses 4 and 6 of Sura 9 belie the impression that many take from v. 5: that pagans are to be offered the choice of "conversion or death." V. 4, however, only specifies that if non-Muslims honor the terms of their existing treaties with Muhammad and the Muslims, the Muslims will honor those treaties to the end of their term. And v. 6, according to Ibn Kathir, gives pagans "safe passage so that they may learn about the religion of Allah, so that Allah's call will spread among His servants....In summary, those who come from a land at war with Muslims to the area of Islam, delivering a message, for business transactions, to negotiate a peace treaty, to pay the Jizyah, to offer an end to hostilities, and so forth, and request safe passage from Muslim leaders or their deputies, should be granted safe passage, as long as they remain in Muslim areas, until they go back to their land and sanctuary." The reference here to paying the Jizyah refers to the tax specified for the People of the Book under Islamic rule in v. 29; thus the choice, at least for those who have received a written scripture (mainly Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians), is not conversion or death, but conversion, subjugation or death.

The Tafsir al-Jalalayn, As-Suyuti, and Ibn Juzayy agree with this view of v. 6. Ibn Juzayy says that it means that Muslims should "grant them security so that they can hear the Qur'an to see whether they will become Muslim or not. (then convey them to a place where they are safe) If they do not become Muslim, return him to his place." He notes, however, that this is not a unanimous view: "This is a firm judgment in the view of some people while other people say that it is abrogated by fighting."

The treaty that the Muslims concluded with the pagans "near the sacred Mosque" (v. 7) refers to the Treaty of Hudaibiyya. In 628, Muhammad had a vision in which he performed the pilgrimage to Mecca — a pagan custom that he very much wanted to make part of Islam, but had thus far been prevented by the Quraysh control of Mecca. But at this time he directed Muslims to prepare to make the pilgrimage to Mecca, and advanced upon the city with fifteen hundred men. The Quraysh met him outside the city, and the two sides concluded a ten-year truce (hudna), the treaty of Hudaibiyya.

Some leading Muslims were unhappy with the prospect of a truce. After all, they had recently broken a Quraysh siege of Medina and were now more powerful than ever. Were they going to bargain away their military might for the sake of being able to make the pilgrimage? According to Muhammad's first biographer, Ibn Ishaq, a furious Umar went to Abu Bakr and said, "Is he not God's apostle, and are we not Muslims, and are they not polytheists? Then why should we agree to what is demeaning to our religion?" The two of them went to Muhammad, who attempted to reassure them: "I am God's slave and His apostle. I will not go against His commandment and He will not make me the loser."

But it certainly didn't seem as if the treaty was being concluded to the Muslims' advantage. When the time came for the agreement to be written, Muhammad called for Ali and told him to write, "In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful." But the Quraysh negotiator, Suhayl bin 'Amr, stopped him: "I do not recognize this; but write 'In thy name, O Allah.'" Muhammad told Ali to write what Suhayl had directed.

But Suhayl was not finished. When Muhammad directed Ali to continue by writing, "This is what Muhammad, the apostle of God, has agreed with Suhayl bin 'Amr," he protested again. "If I witnessed that you were God's apostle," Suhayl told Muhammad, "I would not have fought you. Write your own name and the name of your father." Again the Prophet of Islam, to the increasing dismay of his followers, told Ali to write the document as Suhayl wished.

In the final form of the treaty, Muhammad shocked his men by agreeing to provisions that seemed disadvantageous to the Muslims: those fleeing the Quraysh and seeking refuge with the Muslims would be returned to the Quraysh, while those fleeing the Muslims and seeking refuge with the Quraysh would not be returned to the Muslims.

Yet soon Muhammad broke the treaty. A woman of the Quraysh, Umm Kulthum, joined the Muslims in Medina; her two brothers came to Muhammad, asking that they be returned “in accordance with the agreement between him and the Quraysh at Hudaibiya.” But Muhammad refused: Allah forbade it. He gave Muhammad a new revelation: “O ye who believe! When there come to you believing women refugees, examine and test them: Allah knows best as to their faith: if ye ascertain that they are believers, then send them not back to the unbelievers” (60:10).

In refusing to send Umm Kulthum back to the Quraysh, Muhammad broke the treaty. Although Muslim apologists have claimed throughout history that the Quraysh broke it first, this incident came before all those by the Quraysh that Muslims point to as treaty violations. The contemporary Muslim writer Yahya Emerick asserts that Muhammad based his case on a bit of legal hair-splitting: the treaty stipulated that the Muslims would return to the Quraysh any man who came to them, not any woman. Even if that is true, Muhammad soon – as Emerick acknowledges – began to accept men from the Quraysh as well, thus definitively breaking the treaty.

The breaking of the treaty in this way would reinforce the principle that nothing was good except what was advantageous to Islam, and nothing evil except what hindered Islam. Once the treaty was formally discarded, Islamic jurists enunciated the principle that truces in general could only be concluded on a temporary basis of up to ten years, and that they could only be entered into for the purpose of allowing weakened Muslim forces to gather strength to fight again more effectively.

Nevertheless, Ibn Kathir and others maintain that the Quraysh broke the treaty first. And verses 8-14 certainly give the impression that they did indeed break it, excoriating the pagans for selling “the signs of Allah” for a “miserable price” (v. 9) and for violating oaths they made with the Muslims (vv. 12, 13). Thus because of all their enormities, Allah exhorts the Muslims to fight them (vv. 13-14). According to Ibn Juzayy, “Allah will punish them at your hands” (v. 14) means “killing and capture. That is a promise of victory for the Muslims.” The Tafsir al-Jalalayn concurs: “Fight them, and God will chastise them, He will have them killed, at your hands and degrade them, humiliate them through capture and subjugation, and He will give you victory against them...”

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 9, "Repentance," verses 14-28

[In March 2006](#), a twenty-two-year-old Iranian student named Mohammed Reza Taheri-azar drove an SUV onto the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, deliberately trying to kill people and succeeding in injuring nine. After the incident, he seemed singularly pleased with himself, smiling and waving to crowds after a court appearance at which he explained that he was "thankful for the opportunity to spread the will of Allah." Later he wrote six letters to the Daily Tar Heel, the student newspaper of the University of North Carolina, explaining why he did it. [In one of them](#), he gives a list of "Qur'an Notes Relevant to 3/3/06 Attack."

These include "Instructions and guidelines for fighting and killing in the cause of Allah." Under "Reasons for fighting in the cause of Allah," he cited verses 14 and 15 of sura 9, explaining that fight was "to release anger and rage from Allah's followers' hearts." And indeed, in those verses Allah promises that as he punishes the unbelievers at the hands of the believers and covers them with shame, he will "heal the breasts of believers, and still the indignation of their hearts." Ibn Juzayy and the Tafsir al-Jalalayn, however, focus on the portion of the verse that says that "Allah turns to anyone He wills." Ibn Juzayy explains: "Allah will turn to some of those unbelievers and so that they become Muslims." That decision, as we have seen, is all Allah's. Allah will not leave bereft those who "strive with might and main" (v. 16). The word used here is jahadu (جَاهِدُوا), a form of "jihad," as it is rendered [here](#).

Then verses 17-22 declare that the idolaters or polytheists (mushrikeena, مُشْرِكِينَ, from mushrik, polytheist) are not worthy to take care of the Sacred Mosque in Mecca – although at the time of the revelation of this sura the pagans still control that mosque. They control it, but as comments Ibn Juzayy, "they do not have either the right or the duty to do so. They inhabit them through forceful occupation and injustice." They have no right to the mosque because, according to Ibn Kathir and, indeed, generalized Islamic tradition, Abraham himself built it as a shrine to Allah.

Verses 23-28 tell the believers to separate from and fight the unbelievers. The believers should cut ties even with their own families if they are not Muslims (verses 23-24). Says Ibn Kathir: "Allah commands shunning the disbelievers, even if they are one's parents or children, and prohibits taking them as supporters if they choose disbelief instead of faith." Ibn Juzayy notes that v. 24, with its warning that one should value nothing in this life higher than Allah, is "a threat to anyone who prefers his family, property or home to emigration and jihad." "Emigration" refers to the move to Medina which at that time was incumbent upon all true believers.

Verses 25 and 26 refer to the Battle of Hunayn, which took place after Muhammad conquered Mecca. Once he was the master of Mecca, there was one additional great obstacle between him and mastery of all Arabia. Malik ibn 'Awf, a member of the Hawazin tribe of the city of Ta'if, south of Mecca, began to assemble a force to fight the Muslims. The people of Ta'if had rejected Muhammad and treated him shabbily when he presented his prophetic claim to them ten years earlier. They were historic rivals of the Quraysh, and viewed the conversion of the latter to Islam with disdain. Malik assembled a force and marched out to face the Muslims; Muhammad, according to Ibn Ishaq, met him with an army 12,000 strong, and said, in an echo of v. 25 ("your great numbers delighted you"), "We shall not be worsted today for want of numbers."

The two forces met at a wadi – a dry riverbed — called Hunayn, near Mecca. Malik and his men had arrived first and taken up positions that gave them an immense tactical advantage. The Muslims, despite their superior numbers, were routed. As they broke ranks and fled, Muhammad called out: "Where are you going, men? Come to me. I am God's apostle. I am Muhammad the son of 'Abdullah." Some of the Muslims did take heart, and gradually the tide began to turn – although

with tremendous loss of life on both sides.

The Muslims eventually prevailed, wiping out the last major force that stood between the Prophet of Islam and mastery of Arabia. After the battle Muhammad received another revelation explaining that the Muslims had won because of supernatural help (v. 26). With Malik defeated, the Muslims later conquered Ta'if with little resistance. On his way into the city, Muhammad stopped under a tree, and, finding the property to his liking, sent word to the owner: "Either come out or we will destroy your wall." But the owner refused to appear before Muhammad, so the Muslims indeed destroyed his property. Endeavoring, however, to win the tribesmen of Ta'if to Islam, Muhammad was lenient toward them. In his distribution of the booty, he also favored some of the recent converts among the Quraysh, hoping to cement their allegiance to Islam. His favoritism, however, led to grumbling. One Muslim approached him boldly: "Muhammad, I've seen what you have done today...I don't think you have been just."

The Prophet of Islam was incredulous. "If justice is not to be found with me then where will you find it?" Indeed, for Islam Muhammad's words and deeds are the highest pattern of conduct, forming the only absolute standard: anything sanctioned by the example of the Prophet is good.

According to Ibn Juzayy, the promise that "Allah will turn to whomever he wills" (v. 27) means that "the tribe of Hawazin who had fought the Muslims at Hunayn became Muslim."

The unbelievers are unclean, and thus must not enter the Sacred Mosque (v. 28). Shi'ites in particular regard this as a matter of ritual purity. The Ayatollah Sistani, whom many observers have identified as a beacon of democratic hope for Iraq, likely does not envision a state in which unbelievers have equal rights with believers, since [he puts non-Muslims on the level of other impure things](#):

The following ten things are essentially najis [impure, unclean]:

1. Urine
2. Faeces
3. Semen
4. Dead body
5. Blood
6. Dog
7. Pig
8. Kafir [unbeliever]
9. Alcoholic liquors
10. The sweat of an animal who persistently eats najasat

This idea is based on v. 28. The Tafsir al-Jalalayn says that the polytheists are "impure because of their inward foulness," and As-Suyuti adds that some say "they are actually impure so that they must do ghusl [the full ablution] if they become Muslim and one must do wudu' [the partial ablution] after shaking hands with them." As-Suyuti also notes that this verse forbids unbelievers to enter the Sacred Mosque in Mecca, although he points out that "Abu Hanifa says that People of the Book are not prevented because it is specific to idolaters." Because of [Muhammad's prohibition on non-Muslims in Arabia](#), it is unlikely that a member of the People of the Book would be able to enter Mecca today.

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 9, "Repentance," verse 29

Verse 29 of chapter 9 of the Qur'an is the one place where Muslims are directed explicitly to make war against and subjugate Jews and Christians – the "People of the Book," who once subjugated enter the dhimma, the protection of the Muslims, and become dhimmis, protected (or guilty) people. As such, the way this verse is understood by Muslim interpreters is of cardinal importance for Jews, Christians, and – not least because in the Islamic world one's religion tends to be considered as part of one's ethnic identity, not as a matter of personal conviction, so that even Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens would be considered Christians — non-Muslims in general.

According to As-Sawi, Ibn Juzayy, and many others, "this ayat was revealed when the Messenger of Allah was commanded to fight the Byzantines. When it was sent down, the Messenger of Allah prepared for the expedition to Tabuk." Ibn Kathir agrees: "Allah commanded His Messenger to fight the People of the Scriptures, Jews and Christians, on the ninth year of Hijrah, and he prepared his army to fight the Romans and called the people to Jihad announcing his intent and destination." This was a raid Muhammad attempted against the Byzantine (Eastern Roman) garrison at Tabuk in northern Arabia in 631, but the Byzantine force moved away before Muhammad got there, and did not engage the Muslims in battle. Still, it was his first attempt to take on the great Christian empire that the Muslims would chip away at for centuries and ultimately destroy.

Ibn Juzayy says that this verse is "a command to fight the People of the Book" and, in a reference to v. 30, "denying their belief in Allah because of the words of the Jews, 'Uzayr [Ezra] is the son of Allah' and the words of the Christians, 'The Messiah is the son of Allah.'" Muslims must also fight them "because they consider as lawful carrion, blood, pork, etc." and because "they do not enter Islam." He says that "scholars agree about accepting jizya [a religious-based poll tax] from the Jews and Christians," and adds that "the Magians/Zoroasterians have been added to them going by the words of the Prophet, 'Treat them as People of the Book,'" although "there is disagreement about accepting it from idolaters and Sabians." He specifies that "it is not collected from women, children or the insane," and that it signifies "submission and obedience."

While Islamic law does stipulate that the jizya is not to be collected from women and children, reality in many cases has been different. According to the pioneering historian of dhimmitude, Bat Ye'or:

The poll tax was extorted by torture. The tax inspectors demanded gifts for themselves; widows and orphans were pillaged and despoiled. In theory, women, paupers, the sick, and the infirm were exempt from the poll tax; nevertheless, Armenian, Syriac, and Jewish sources provide abundant proof that the jizya was exacted from children, widows, orphans, and even the dead. A considerable number of extant documents, preserved over the centuries, testify to the persistence and endurance of these measures. In Aleppo in 1683, French Consul Chevalier Laurent d'Arvieux noted that ten-year-old Christian children paid the jizya. Here again, one finds the disparity and contradiction between the ideal in the theory and the reality of the facts. (*The Decline of Eastern Christianity Under Islam*, pp. 78-9).

The Tafsir al-Jalalayn says that this when v. 29 specifies that Muslims must fight against those who "follow not the Religion of Truth," it means those who do not follow Islam, "which is firm and abrogates other deens [religions]." Ibn Kathir gives a hint as to why this is so when he explains that the People of the Book were in bad faith when they rejected Muhammad, and that they are not true believers even in their own religions:

Therefore, when People of the Scriptures disbelieved in Muhammad, they had no beneficial faith in any Messenger or what the Messengers brought. Rather, they followed their religions because this

conformed with their ideas, lusts and the ways of their forefathers, not because they are Allah's Law and religion. Had they been true believers in their religions, that faith would have directed them to believe in Muhammad, because all Prophets gave the good news of Muhammad's advent and commanded them to obey and follow him. Yet when he was sent, they disbelieved in him, even though he is the mightiest of all Messengers. Therefore, they do not follow the religion of earlier Prophets because these religions came from Allah, but because these suit their desires and lusts. Therefore, their claimed faith in an earlier Prophet will not benefit them because they disbelieved in the master, the mightiest, the last and most perfect of all Prophets.

As-Sawi specifies that the payment of the jizya signifies that the non-Muslims are "humble and obedient to the judgements of Islam." As-Suyuti notes that the jizya is "not taken from someone in a state of hardship," although that was a stipulation at times honored in the breach. For example, a contemporary account of the Muslims' conquest of Nikiou, an Egyptian town, in the 640's, says that "it is impossible to describe the lamentable position of the inhabitants of this town, who came to the point of offering their children in exchange for the enormous sums that they had to pay each month..."

This was a manifestation of the "state of abasement" specified by this verse and spelled out by the Bedouin commander al-Mughira bin Sa'd when he met the Persian Rustam. Said al-Mughira: "I call you to Islam or else you must pay the jizya while you are in a state of abasement."

Rustam replied, "I know what jizya means, but what does 'a state of abasement' mean?"

Al-Mughira explained: "You pay it while you are standing and I am sitting and the whip hanging is over your head."

Similarly, Ibn Kathir says that the dhimmis must be "disgraced, humiliated and belittled. Therefore, Muslims are not allowed to honor the people of Dhimmah or elevate them above Muslims, for they are miserable, disgraced and humiliated." The seventh-century jurist Sa'id ibn al-Musayyab stated: "I prefer that the people of the dhimma become tired by paying the jizya since He says, 'until they pay the jizya with their own hands in a state of complete abasement.'" As-Suyuti elaborates that this verse "is used as a proof by those who say that it is taken in a humiliating way, and so the taker sits and the dhimmi stands with his head bowed and his back bent. The jizya is placed in the balance and the taker seizes his beard and hits his chin." He adds, however, that "this is rejected according to an-Nawawi who said, 'This manner is invalid.'" Zamakhshari, however, agreed that the jizya should be collected "with belittlement and humiliation."

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 9, "Repentance," verse 29, Part 2

Verse 29 of chapter 9 of the Qur'an, as we saw last week, mandates that the Muslims fight against the Jews and Christians "until they pay the jizya [poll tax] with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued."

Asad, Daryabadi and other Western-oriented commentators maintain that the jizya was merely a tax for exemption for military service. Asad explains: "every able-bodied Muslim is obliged to take up arms in jihad (i.e., in a just war in God's cause) whenever the freedom of his faith or the political safety of his community is imperiled... Since this is, primarily, a religious obligation, non-Muslim citizens, who do not subscribe to the ideology of Islam, cannot in fairness be expected to assume a similar burden." But they pass in silence over the latter part of v. 29, which mandates the humiliation of non-Muslims.

In explaining how the Jews and Christians must "feel themselves subdued," Ibn Kathir quotes a saying of Muhammad: "Do not initiate the Salam [greeting of peace] to the Jews and Christians, and if you meet any of them in a road, force them to its narrowest alley." He then goes on to outline the notorious Pact of Umar, an agreement made, according to Islamic tradition, between the caliph Umar, who ruled the Muslims from 634 to 644, and a Christian community.

This Pact is worth close examination, because it became the foundation for Islamic law regarding the treatment of the dhimmis. With remarkably little variation, throughout Islamic history whenever Islamic law was strictly enforced, this is generally how non-Muslims were treated. Working from the full text as Ibn Kathir has it, these are the conditions the Christians accept in return for "safety for ourselves, children, property and followers of our religion" – conditions that, according to Ibn Kathir, "ensured their continued humiliation, degradation and disgrace." The Christians will not:

1. Build "a monastery, church, or a sanctuary for a monk";
2. "Restore any place of worship that needs restoration";
3. Use such places "for the purpose of enmity against Muslims";
4. "Allow a spy against Muslims into our churches and homes or hide deceit [or betrayal] against Muslims";
5. Imitate the Muslims' "clothing, caps, turbans, sandals, hairstyles, speech, nicknames and title names";
6. "Ride on saddles, hang swords on the shoulders, collect weapons of any kind or carry these weapons";
7. "Encrypt our stamps in Arabic"
8. "Sell liquor" – Christians in Iraq in the last few years ran afoul of Muslims reasserting this rule;
9. "Teach our children the Qur'an";
10. "Publicize practices of Shirk" – that is, associating partners with Allah, such as regarding Jesus as Son of God. In other words, Christian and other non-Muslim religious practice will be private, if not downright furtive;
11. Build "crosses on the outside of our churches and demonstrating them and our books in public in Muslim fairways and markets" – again, Christian worship must not be public, where Muslims can see it and become annoyed;
12. "Sound the bells in our churches, except discreetly, or raise our voices while reciting our holy books inside our churches in the presence of Muslims, nor raise our voices [with prayer] at our funerals, or light torches in funeral processions in the fairways of Muslims, or their markets";
13. "Bury our dead next to Muslim dead";
14. "Buy servants who were captured by Muslims";
15. "Invite anyone to Shirk" – that is, proselytize, although the Christians also agree not to;
16. "Prevent any of our fellows from embracing Islam, if they choose to do so." Thus the Christians

can be the objects of proselytizing, but must not engage in it themselves;

17. "Beat any Muslim."

Meanwhile, the Christians will:

1. Allow Muslims to rest "in our churches whether they come by day or night";
2. "Open the doors [of our houses of worship] for the wayfarer and passerby";
3. Provide board and food for "those Muslims who come as guests" for three days;
4. "Respect Muslims, move from the places we sit in if they choose to sit in them" – shades of Jim Crow;
5. "Have the front of our hair cut, wear our customary clothes wherever we are, wear belts around our waist" – these are so that a Muslim recognizes a non-Muslim as such and doesn't make the mistake of greeting him with *As-salaamu aleikum*, "Peace be upon you," which is the Muslim greeting for a fellow Muslim;
6. "Be guides for Muslims and refrain from breaching their privacy in their homes."

The Christians swore: "If we break any of these promises that we set for your benefit against ourselves, then our *Dhimma* (promise of protection) is broken and you are allowed to do with us what you are allowed of people of defiance and rebellion."

Of course, the Pact of Umar is a seventh-century document. But the imperative to subjugate non-Muslims as mandated by Qur'an 9:29 and elaborated by this Pact became and remained part of Islamic law. In the nineteenth century the Western powers began to pressure the last Islamic empire, the Ottoman Empire, to abolish the *dhimma*. In Baghdad in the early nineteenth century, Sheikh Syed Mahmud Allusi (1802-1853), author of the noted commentary on the Qur'an *Ruhul Ma'ani*, complains that the Muslims have grown so weak that the *dhimmis* pay the *jizya* through agents, rather than delivering it themselves on foot. In his *Tafsir Anwar al-Bayan*, the twentieth-century Indian Mufti Muhammad Aashiq Ilahi Bulandshahri laments that "in today's times, the system of Atonement (*Jizya*) is not practised at all by the Muslims. It is indeed unfortunate that not only are the Muslim States afraid to impose Atonement (*Jizya*) on the disbelievers (*kuffar*) living in their countries, but they grant them more rights than they grant the Muslims and respect them more. They fail to understand that Allah desires that the Muslims show no respect to any disbeliever (*kafir*) and that they should not accord any special rights to them."

The influential twentieth century jihadist theorist Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) emphasizes that these rules should be revived, for "these verses are given as a general statement, and the order to fight the people of the earlier revelations until they pay the submission tax with a willing hand and are subdued is also of general import" (In the Shade of the Qur'an, Vol. VIII, p. 126).

Likewise the Pakistani jihadist writer and activist Syed Abul A'la Maududi (1903-1979) states that "the simple fact is that according to Islam, non-Muslims have been granted the freedom to stay outside the Islamic fold and to cling to their false, man-made, ways if they so wish." That heads off any potential contradiction between his understanding of v. 29 and 2:256, "There is no compulsion in religion." Maududi continues by declaring that the unbelievers "have, however, absolutely no right to seize the reins of power in any part of God's earth nor to direct the collective affairs of human beings according to their own misconceived doctrines. For if they are given such an opportunity, corruption and mischief will ensue. In such a situation the believers would be under an obligation to do their utmost to dislodge them from political power and to make them live in subservience to the Islamic way of life" (Towards Understanding the Qur'an, vol. III, p. 202).

Islamic apologists in the West today commonly assert that 9:29 commands warfare only against the Jews and Christians who fought against Muhammad, and no others. I wish that every Muslim

believed that, but unfortunately that has never been the mainstream Islamic understanding of this verse. Indeed, if it had been, the Pact of Umar, which I detail above, would never have been made — for it was made after Muhammad’s death with Christians against whom he did not fight. That in itself, as well as the teachings of all the schools of Islamic law, illustrates that this verse was always understood as having a universal application.

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 9, "Repentance," verses 30-49

No Jews have ever been found who match the Qur'an's description of them, in v. 30 of sura 9, as proclaiming that Ezra is the Son of God. Ibn Juzayy explains that only a small group of Jews actually said this, but "it is ascribed to all of them because they followed those who said it." The *Tanwîr al-Miqbâs min Tafsîr Ibn 'Abbâs* attributes this belief to the Jews of Medina. In any case, this belief, asserted by the Qur'an and thereby confirmed as true in the minds of many Muslims, makes the Jews as well as the Christians guilty of shirk, the association of partners with Allah, which is the worst sin of all. Ibn Juzayy quotes another Islamic authority saying that the Christian belief is "atrocious disbelief." Adds Ibn Kathir, "This is why Allah declared both groups to be liars," for "they have no proof that supports their claim, other than lies and fabrications."

Consequently, they are accursed of Allah. V. 30 goes on to say, "Allah fight them!," which Ibn Juzayy explains as "May Allah curse them!" Their idolatry doesn't stop there, either. They even go so far as to take "as lords beside Allah their rabbis and their monks and the Messiah son of Mary, when they were bidden to worship only One Allah" (v. 31). Do the Jews, then, worship rabbis and Christians worship monks? Not directly: Muhammad explained that the rabbis and monks prohibited what Allah had allowed for the Jews and Christians, and allowed what he had prohibited, "and they obeyed them. This is how they worshipped them."

Muhammad also said: "Verily, the Jews have earned the anger (of Allah) and the Christians are misguided" – an echo of the *Fatihah*. The Jews and Christians are so perverse and rebellious that they would like to "put out the light of Allah" – that is, says the *Tafsir al-Jalalayn*, "His Shari'a and proofs" – "with their mouths" (v. 32), but Allah will thwart their plans. Ibn Juzayy explains v. 33 by saying that Allah will put Islam "above all other deens," that is, religions, and will "make it strong so that it embraces the east and the west." As Muhammad put it: "This matter (Islam) will keep spreading as far as the night and day reach, until Allah will not leave a house made of mud or hair, but will make this religion enter it, while bringing might to a mighty person (a Muslim) and humiliation to a disgraced person (who rejects Islam)."

Ibn Juzayy adds that "it is said" that Islam will embrace the east and the west "when 'Isa [Jesus] descends and then only the deen [religion] of Islam will remain." This refers to Muhammad's statement that the "son of Mary (Jesus) will shortly descend amongst you people (Muslims) as a just ruler and will break the Cross and kill the pig and abolish the Jizya (a tax taken from the non-Muslims, who are in the protection, of the Muslim government)." That is, Jesus will abolish the *dhimma*, the contract of protection between Muslims and non-Muslims, and Islamize the world.

Allah warns the Muslims about Jewish rabbis and Christian monks who "devour the wealth of mankind wantonly and debar (men) from the way of Allah" – the tortures of hell await them (vv. 34-35). Says Ibn Kathir: "This Ayah warns against corrupt scholars and misguided worshippers. Sufyan bin 'Uyaynah said, 'Those among our scholars who become corrupt are similar to the Jews, while those among our worshippers who become misguided are like Christians.'... When Allah sent His Messenger [Muhammad], the Jews persisted in their misguidance, disbelief and rebellion, hoping to keep their status and position. However, Allah extinguished all this and took it away from them with the light of Prophethood and instead gave them disgrace and degradation, and they incurred the anger of Allah, the Exalted." Accordingly, Muslims must "wage war on all of the idolaters as they are waging war on all of you" (v. 36). In v. 37, says Ibn Kathir, "Allah admonishes the idolaters for choosing their wicked opinions over Allah's Law. They changed Allah's legislation based upon their vain desires, allowing what Allah prohibited and prohibiting what Allah allowed." The Muslims should not hesitate out of an attachment to this world (v. 38). The latter verse "is a rebuke," explains Ibn Juzayy, "to those who stayed behind the expedition to Tabuk" that Muhammad led against the Byzantines. Those who do not fight – "i.e. go out with the Prophet on

jihad,” says the Tafsir al-Jalalayn — will face divine punishment and replacement with another people (v. 39).

Not that Muhammad needed their help, for “Allah did indeed help him, when the Unbelievers drove him out” (v. 40). This refers, according to Ibn Kathir, to “the year of the Hijrah,” when “the idolaters tried to kill, imprison or expel the Prophet.” Muslims should fight “light or heavy,” that is, whatever their circumstances (v. 41) – although Ibn Kathir, Ibn Juzayy and the Tafsir al-Jalalayn all agree that that command was abrogated by 9:91: “There is no blame on those who are infirm, or ill, or who find no resources to spend (on the cause), if they are sincere (in duty) to Allah and His Messenger.”

Still, jihad for the sake of Allah (jihad fi sabil Allah, which denotes in Islamic theology armed struggle to establish the hegemony of the Islamic social order) is the best deed a Muslim can perform (v. 41). Muhammad also emphasized this on many occasions. Once a man asked him:

“Guide me to such a deed as equals Jihad (in reward).”

Muhammad answered: “I do not find such a deed.”

Allah has more harsh words for the Muslims who did not accompany Muhammad to Tabuk, accusing them of preferring the easy life to a hard journey of jihad, and lying about having been willing to go if they could have (v. 42). Allah even rebuked his prophet for excusing Muslims from the Tabuk expedition (v. 43). He told Muhammad that true Muslims did not hesitate to wage jihad, even to the point of risking their property and their very lives. The ones who refused to do this weren’t believers (vv. 44-45). But actually, it was Allah who was “averse to their being sent forth; so He made them lag behind” (v. 46), because if they had come along, they would only have caused trouble for Muhammad (v. 47). After all, they have plotted sedition before (v. 48).

According to Ibn Ishaq, the unnamed slacker who begged Muhammad, “Grant me leave (to stay at home) and tempt me not” (v. 49) was referring to his weakness for women. He asked Muhammad: “Will you allow me to stay behind and not tempt me, for everyone knows that I am strongly addicted to women and I am afraid that if I see the Byzantine women I shall not be able to control myself.”

Muhammad granted him permission, but Allah is not happy, and tells his prophet that those who have asked to be excused have already fallen into temptation by doing so, and that hell awaits them also (v. 49).

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 9, "Repentance," verses 50-80

Verses 50-80 of Sura 9, "Repentance," excoriate the Hypocrites — those who claim to be Muslims but aren't really believers. In fact, they grieve at the Muslims' good fortune and rejoice when they suffer (v. 50). But Allah tells the Muslims to ask them, "Can you expect for us (any fate) other than one of two glorious things?" (v. 52). The two things are martyrdom or victory, according to Ibn Abbas, Mujahid, Qatadah, and others. In other words, the Muslims will either defeat the Hypocrites or be killed by them, in which case they will enter Paradise — a win/win situation.

The Hypocrites, meanwhile, may "spend (for the cause) willingly or unwillingly" (v. 53); in either case, Allah will not accept it from them, "for ye are indeed a people rebellious and wicked." According to the Ruhul Ma'ani, this verse was revealed in reference to one of the Hypocrites, Jadd bin Qais, who was willing to donate money to Muhammad's expedition to Tabuk, but not to join the caravan and fight himself. His hypocrisy, and that of others like him, renders their contributions unacceptable (v. 54). But Muhammad should not be impressed with their wealth or the number of their sons, for "Allah's plan is to punish them with these things in this life, and that their souls may perish in their (very) denial of Allah" (v. 55). According to Al-Hasan Al-Basri, Allah will accomplish this plan "by taking the Zakah due on their money from them and spending it in Allah's cause." For these are not true Muslims, and they even dare to question Muhammad's integrity over how he distributes alms (vv. 56-60). It was at this point that the incident to which I referred here took place: one of the Hypocrites said to Muhammad, "Be fair, Muhammad! You have not been fair." Muhammad replied: "Bother you! If I am not fair, who will be fair?"

According to the Tafsir al-Jalalayn, the Hypocrites should have been content with "what Allah and His Messenger gave them" (v. 59) "in respect of booty and the like." V. 60 specifies those to whom the obligatory alms, zakat, can be distributed. The verse says that it can be spent "in the cause of Allah." Ibn Kathir explains: "In the cause of Allah is exclusive for the benefit of the fighters in Jihad, who do not receive compensation from the Muslim Treasury." As-Suyuti adds: "Some say that it is spent on all that is connected to jihad: treaties with the enemy, building fortresses, digging ditches, providing weapons and provision, and paying spies, even if they are Christians."

The Hypocrites also bother Muhammad by claiming that he is "all ear" (v. 61). Says Ibn Juzayy: "he hears all that is said and confirms it." That is, he is too good-natured for his own good: the Tafsir al-Jalalayn quotes the Hypocrites saying that Muhammad "hears every little thing and accepts it. When we swear to him that we did not say it, he believes us." Ibn Abbas, Mujahid and Qatadah agree: Muhammad listens "to those who say anything about us; he believes whoever talks to him. Therefore, if we went to him and swore, he would believe us." But in fact, says Ibn Kathir, "he knows who's saying the truth and who is lying."

And that is just one reason why he is so important. He is so central that believers should not swear by Allah alone, but by Allah and His Messenger (v. 62), and whoever opposes Allah and Muhammad is headed for hell (v. 63). The Hypocrites, recognizing that Muhammad tends to receive revelations about his enemies (one notorious example is sura 111, which is entirely devoted to cursing his uncle, Abu Lahab, who didn't accept his claim to be a prophet), are "afraid lest a Sura should be sent down about them, showing them what is (really passing) in their hearts" (v. 64). But Allah, according to Ibn Kathir, "will expose and explain your reality to His Messenger through revelation" — that is, the secrets of the Hypocrites. They say they were just joking when they mocked Allah and Muhammad (v. 65), but in reality they are apostates (v. 66). "Mocking the signs of Allah," says As-Suyuti, "is tantamount to kufr [unbelief]," and of course, nothing is worse than unbelief. That may explain why cartoons of Muhammad strike such a nerve in the Islamic world. The Hypocrites will dwell in hellfire (v. 68) for ignoring the messages of the prophets (v. 70).

By contrast, however, the believers will dwell forever in the gardens of Paradise (vv. 71-2). Said Muhammad: “Two gardens, their pots and whatever is in them are made of gold, and two gardens, their pots and whatever is in them are made of silver. Only the Veil of Pride of Allah’s Face separates the people from gazing at Him, in the garden of Eden.” But before they can enjoy all that, Muhammad and the Muslims must “strive hard [jahidi, جَاهِدْ] against the unbelievers and the Hypocrites, and be firm against them” (v. 73). Ibn Abbas explains: “Allah commanded the Prophet to fight the disbelievers with the sword, to strive against the hypocrites with the tongue and annulled lenient treatment of them.” Ad-Dahhak adds: “Perform Jihad against the disbelievers with the sword and be harsh with the hypocrites with words, and this is the Jihad performed against them.” And Ibn Juzayy: “Jihad against the rejecters is by the sword and jihad against the hypocrites is by the tongue as long as they do not openly display that which indicates their disbelief....Harshness is the opposite of mercy and compassion. It can be by word, action, etc.” Significantly, Al-Hasan and Qatadah asserted that “striving against them includes establishing the (Islamic Penal) Law of equality against them.”

One of the Muslims who refused to accompany Muhammad on the Tabuk expedition was Julas bin Suwayd, along with his brother Harith. According to Ibn Ishaq, Julas said of Muhammad: “If this man is right we are worse than donkeys.”

One of Julas’s relatives, Umayr bin Sa’d, told Muhammad what Julas had said. Then he explained to Julas that he had done so because Islam is most important: “You are dearer to me than any man, the most generous to me, and it is most painful to me that anything should happen to upset you; but you have said words which if I repeat them I shall bring shame upon you, and if I keep silence I shall bring my religion into peril. One is preferable to the other.”

Julas and Harith, cornered, denied that Julas had spoken the offending words, whereupon Allah revealed: “They swear by Allah that they said nothing (evil), but indeed they uttered blasphemy, and they did it after accepting Islam...” (v. 74). Allah offered them a chance to repent, but warned that if he didn’t, “Allah will punish them with a grievous penalty in this life and in the Hereafter: they shall have none on earth to protect or help them” (v. 74). They repented.

But the Hypocrites have turned back from Allah (v. 76), so Allah has cast “hypocrisy into their hearts” (v. 77), and now, even if Muhammad should “ask seventy times for their forgiveness, Allah will not forgive them: because they have rejected Allah and His Messenger” (v. 80) — shades, in reverse, of Matthew 18:21-22.

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 9, "Repentance," verses 81-129

Verse 81-89 of Sura 9, "Repentance," excoriate Muslims who refused to accompany Muhammad on his expedition to Tabuk, where he had hoped to fight the Byzantines in the year 631. Some begged off because of the scorching heat in Arabia, making an expedition particularly trying – leading Allah to taunt them about the heat of hell, for "they hated to strive and fight," that is, wage jihad (yujahidoo, يُجَاهِدُوا) "with their goods and their persons, in the cause of Allah" (v. 81). Ibn Kathir explains: "if they have any comprehension or understanding, they would have marched with the Messenger of Allah during the heat, so as to save themselves from the Fire of Jahannam [Hell], which is much more severe."

Even if the Hypocrites were to change their minds and want to join Muhammad on a future expedition, they are forever barred from doing so (v. 83). Muhammad and the Muslims should not even pray for them when they die (v. 84). They will be punished in this world also (v. 85 – a repeat of v. 55). But Muhammad and the Muslims who do "strive and fight [jahadoo, جَاهِدُوا] with their wealth and their persons" will enter the gardens of Paradise (vv. 88-89).

Verses 90-105 single out for the Bedouin Arabs for especial criticism for not going to Tabuk. Ibn Juzayy says that this in itself invalidated their claim to be Muslim: "They were the people who did not go on jihad nor ask excuses to stay behind them, so they lied when they claimed to believe." This is not to say that no one can be excused from jihad: one may stay behind if he is "infirm, or ill," or has "no resources to spend (on the cause)" (v. 91). Ibn Kathir explains the conditions: "Allah mentions here the valid excuses that permit one to stay away from fighting. He first mentions the excuses that remain with a person, the weakness in the body that disallows one from Jihad, such as blindness, limping, and so forth. He then mentions the excuses that are not permanent, such as an illness that would prevent one from fighting in the cause of Allah, or poverty that prevents preparing for Jihad. There is no sin in these cases if they remain behind, providing that when they remain behind, they do not spread malice or try to discourage Muslims from fighting, but all the while observing good behavior in this state."

But the rich claim exemption (v. 93) and present excuses to Muhammad, who is not to accept them (v. 94), for these people are unclean (v. 95). The worst unbelievers and Hypocrites are the Bedouins (v. 97). Allah accused some of them of plotting against Muhammad, and warned that their plots would backfire (v. 98). However, some truly believe (v. 99). Allah may forgive those who repent of their wrongdoings, who have "mixed an act that was good with another that was evil" (v. 102). Ibn Juzayy explains that "this ayat was sent down about Abu Lubaba. His virtuous action was jihad and his bad action consisted of advising the Banu Qurayza" – that is, the Jewish tribe that broke their covenant with the Muslims and that Muhammad subsequently had massacred. Those who repent can seal their repentance by giving alms (vv. 103-104).

Verses 106-112 contrast false belief with the genuine article. On the way back from Tabuk, Muhammad received news about a mosque that a group of Muslims had built in opposition to his authority. Allah gave him a revelation making clear the malign intent of the builders, despite their protestations of good intentions (v. 107). Muhammad ordered his followers to burn the mosque to the ground. Ibn Kathir says that its builders had "made it an outpost for those who warred against Allah and His Messenger."

V. 111, with its guarantee of Paradise to those who "kill and are killed" for Allah, has become in the modern age the rationale for suicide bombing. Ibn Kathir explains: "Allah states that He has compensated His believing servants for their lives and wealth — if they give them up in His cause — with Paradise." Ibn Juzayy adds, significantly: "It is said that it was sent down about the

Homage of ‘Aqaba [an early pledge of Muslims’ willingness to wage war for Islam], but its judgment is general to every believer doing jihad in the way of Allah until the Day of Rising.” So it has been understood. Abu Abdel Aziz, a modern-day jihadist who fought in Afghanistan and Bosnia, said in a 1994 interview: “I have found that the best sacrifice we can offer for the sake of Allah, is our souls, then our possession[s].” Then he quoted v. 111.

The Qur’an says that this promise of Paradise to those who kill and are killed for Allah is also in the Torah and Gospel, but it isn’t – which is in itself more evidence for pious Muslims that those documents have been tampered with.

Verses 113-129 emphasize that loyalty to Allah comes before everything, and Allah controls all. Muhammad and the Muslims should not pray for pagans, even relatives (v. 113, cf. v. 84). Abraham even dissociated himself from his father when he realized he was an “enemy of Allah” (v. 114). Allah will not mislead a people after he has guided them to the truth (v. 115) – Ibn Juzayy explains: “This ayat was sent down about some Muslims who asked forgiveness for the idolaters without permission and then they feared for themselves on that account and so the ayat was sent down to console them, i.e. Allah would not take you to task for that before it was clear to you that it was forbidden.” The “three who were left behind” who are forgiven in v. 118 were three Muslims who, according to Ibn Juzayy, “stayed behind the Tabuk expedition without excuse and without hypocrisy nor intention to stay behind.” The believers must “Fear Allah and be with those who are true,” which means, according to as-Suyuti, “to be truthful in everything and in every situation.” However, Muhammad allowed for lying “in battle, for bringing reconciliation amongst persons and the narration of the words of the husband to his wife, and the narration of the words of a wife to her husband (in a twisted form in order to bring reconciliation between them).”

The people of Medina and the Bedouins should not have hesitated to follow Muhammad, because anything they suffered in that adventure would have been credited to them as a deed of righteousness. Nothing that infuriates the unbelievers will go unrewarded (v. 120). However, all the Muslims need not go forth to wage jihad warfare (v. 122). Ibn Abbas says, “it is not necessary for all the Muslims to go on raids.” This is a foundation for the Islamic legal principle that jihad is fard kifaya — that is, a community obligation from which some are freed if others take it up. Jihad becomes fard ayn, or obligatory on every believer, when a Muslim land is attacked. In general, Muslims must fight against the unbelievers, and be harsh toward them (v. 123).

The suras of the Qur’an increase the Muslims’ faith (v. 124), but only add to the doubts of the disbelievers (vv. 125-127).

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 10, "Jonah"

Although there are 114 suras of the Qur'an, now that I have completed the first 10 in my Blogging the Qur'an series, I'm about a third of the way through the book. In case you're just tuning in, what I'm trying to do is illuminate the Islamic understanding of the Qur'an by exploring various mainstream Muslim commentaries on the various passages. As we go, of course, some clear preoccupations of the Muslim holy book become clear, and they have important implications for non-Muslims today who are confronted the world over by Muslims who take these teachings seriously.

Feedback is welcome -- especially answers to the following questions:

1. Helllllooooo out there! Is anyone out there actually reading this thing?
2. If your answer to #1 is yes, do you find it helpful?
3. If your answer to #1 is no, why not?
4. What do you think I should change about it, short of dropping the whole project (which I do not intend to do), that would make it more useful to you?

Thanks for any input.

And here is this week's segment:

Surah 10, "Jonah," dates from late in the Meccan period, the first part of Muhammad's prophetic career. Its name comes from v. 98, where the prophet Jonah is mentioned in passing. After another set of three mysterious letters, the chapter begins by declaring, "These are the ayats [signs] of the Book of Wisdom" (v. 1). "This indicates," says Ibn Kathir, "that these are verses of the Qur'an, in which the wisdom of judgment is clear."

Verses 2-36 sum up that "wisdom of judgment" via a series of assertions: Allah made all things (vv. 5-6); the idols that the unbelievers worship are worthless (v. 18); some people are ungrateful to Allah (v. 12); Allah destroyed earlier generations of unbelievers (v. 13); the unbelievers will burn in hell (vv. 8, 27); and the believers will enjoy the gardens of Paradise (vv. 9, 26).

The skins of the blessed will be white, and that of the damned black (vv. 26-27). Ibn Kathir quotes a hadith to this effect: "When the people of Paradise enter Paradise," we're told, "a caller will say: 'O people of Paradise, Allah has promised you something that He wishes to fulfill.'" Then the blessed will answer: "What is it? Has He not made our Scale heavy?" – that is, has he not judged that our good deeds outweigh our bad ones? "Has He not made our faces white and delivered us from Fire?" For "no blackness or darkness will be on their faces during the different events of the Day of Judgment. But the faces of the rebellious disbelievers will be stained with dust and darkness." Though some have tried to make this into a racial statement, there is nothing in the mainstream Muslim Qur'an commentaries to support this; it is clearly a moral judgment, not a racial one.

Verses 37-41 turn to the excellence of the Qur'an, and how Muhammad should respond to those who challenge it. Allah tells Muhammad that the Qur'an could only have been produced by Allah, and that it confirms the earlier revelations, and contains "a fuller explanation of the Book — wherein there is no doubt — from the Lord of the worlds." Ibn Kathir expatiates on this:

The Qur'an has a miraculous nature that cannot be imitated. No one can produce anything similar to the Qur'an, nor ten Surahs or even one Surah like it. The eloquence, clarity, precision and grace of the Qur'an cannot be but from Allah. The great and abundant principles and meanings within the Qur'an — which are of great benefit in this world and for the Hereafter — cannot be but from

Allah. There is nothing like His High Self and Attributes or like His sayings and actions. Therefore His Words are not like the words of His creatures.

It confirms earlier books, he explains, “and is a witness to them. It shows the changes, perversions and corruption that have taken place within these Books” – reflecting the mainstream Islamic belief that the Jewish and Christian Scriptures of today are merely corrupted versions of the original messages of the Muslim prophets Moses and Jesus. The Qur’an corrects these corruptions, and no one can produce a chapter like it (v. 38).

Why issue a challenge like this? Because, turning once again to Ibn Kathir, “eloquence was a part of the nature and character of the Arabs. Arabic poetry including *Al-Mu`allaqat* — the oldest complete collection of the most eloquent ancient Arabic poems — was considered to be the best in the literary arts. However Allah sent down to them something whose style none were familiar with, and no one is equal in stature to imitate. So those who believed among them, believed because of what they knew and felt in the Book, including its beauty, elegance, benefit, and fluency. They became the most knowledgeable of the Qur’an and its best in adhering to it.” This is one of the principal reasons why traditional Islamic theology says that the Qur’an cannot be translated: losing the music of the Arabic language, it loses part of its essence.

Here, in any case, are a number of attempts to take up the Qur’anic challenge.

Verses 42-70 repeat many of the same themes, continuing to criticize for failing to heed the messengers from Allah, which have been sent to every nation (v. 47). Allah’s eternal punishments should move the sinners to repent (vv. 50-54), for he gives life and takes it, and to him all shall return (v. 56). All creatures belong to Allah, and the idolaters invent lies against Allah (v. 66). The unbelievers even dare to claim that Allah has a son, when actually he is self-sufficient. The *Tafsir al-Jalalayn* explains: “They, that is, the Jews and the Christians, and those who claim that the angels are the daughters of God, say, ‘God has taken [to Him] a son.’” But in fact, “He is Independent, [without need] of anyone, for only he who has need of a child would desire [to have] one. To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and all that is in the earth, as possessions, creatures and servants.”

Then verses 71-93 tell the stories of Noah (vv. 71-74) and Moses (vv. 75-93), without significant variation from the versions in sura 7. Both Noah and Moses are cast in roles much like Muhammad’s: prophets whose messages go unheeded by their insolent and spiteful hearers, who are duly punished. Moses actually prays here that Allah not have mercy on Pharaoh: “Deface, our Lord, the features of their wealth, and send hardness to their hearts, so they will not believe until they see the grievous penalty” (v. 88). Allah accepts their prayer (v. 89), although when Pharaoh repents (v. 90), Allah saves him (v. 92). He “settled the Children of Israel in a beautiful dwelling-place,” but “they fell into schisms” (v. 93). According to a hadith, “the Jews separated into seventy-one sects, and the Christians separated into seventy-two sects, and this Ummah [the Muslim community] will separate into seventy-three sects, one of which is in Paradise, seventy-two in the Fire.”

The sura concludes with reassurance for Muhammad and affirmations of Allah’s sovereignty, in verses 94-109. Allah tells Muhammad to “ask those who have been reading the Book from before thee” if he doubts the revelations he has been receiving (v. 94). The *Tafsir al-Jalalayn* says that this means that Muhammad should “question those who read the Scripture, the Torah, before you, for it is confirmed [therein] with them and they can inform you of its truth.” This assumes, of course, that uncorrupted versions of the Jewish (and Christian) Scriptures were available in Muhammad’s day – a contention that creates immense difficulties for the Islamic claim that they were corrupted at all, since copies exist from that era, and they are not different from the Jewish and Christian Scriptures as they exist today. But ultimately, it is up to Allah who believes and who doesn’t (vv. 99-100). Why he would create human beings only to torture them in eternal fire is left unexplained.

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 11, "Hud"

Sura 11, "Hud," dates (like sura 10) from late in the Meccan period, the first part of Muhammad's prophetic career. Its name comes from verses 50-60, which tell the story of the prophet Hud, who was according to Islamic tradition sent to the 'Ad people of Arabia around 2400 BC. Sura 11 repeats in stronger terms the warnings of sura 10 concerning Allah's judgment. That, according to a hadith, caused Muhammad anxiety. Once one of his leading followers, Abu Bakr, said to him, "O Messenger of Allah, verily your hair has turned gray." Muhammad replied that Sura 11, along with suras 56, 77, 78, and 81, all of which deal with judgment day, "have turned my hair gray."

This hair-graying sura begins (verses 1-24) with a recapitulation of many themes touched on in sura 10, including the wisdom of the Qur'an itself (v. 1). Mujahid, Qatadah, and Ibn Jarir, among others, explained this verse as meaning that the Qur'an is "perfect in its wording, detailed in its meaning. Thus, it is complete in its form and its meaning." For, says Ibn Kathir, "this Qur'an descended, perfect and detailed, with the purpose of Allah's worship alone, without any partners." The Qur'an is also inimitable: the challenge to produce a sura like it is repeated in v. 13. Stressed: the necessity to worship only Allah (v. 2) and the dependence of all creatures upon him (v. 6); the worthlessness of idols (v. 14); the deceptive glamour of this life (v. 15); the dreadful punishment (vv. 16, 22) that awaits those who "invent a lie against Allah" (v. 18), and the delightful gardens that await the blessed (v. 23).

Verse 5 contains a strange statement: "At the very moment when they cover themselves with their clothing, Allah knows that which they keep hidden and that which they proclaim." What would covering themselves with clothing have to do with Allah knowing them? Well, it appears that some people wore clothes to conceal themselves from Allah, particularly during intimate moments: Ibn Abbas explains that "there were people who used to be shy to remove their clothes while answering the call of nature in an open space and thus be naked exposed to the sky. They were also ashamed of having sexual relations with their women due to fear of being exposed towards the sky. Thus, this was revealed concerning them."

Then follow the stories of various prophets, all revolving around their rejection by perverse and obstinate unbelievers. Verses 25-49 tell the story of Noah and the ark, with a significant difference from the Biblical story. In Genesis 6-9, Noah has nothing to do with the unbelievers at all; God tells him, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh; for the earth is filled with violence through them; behold, I will destroy them with the earth" (Genesis 6:13), and tells him to build the ark, but he doesn't tell him to go warn the people about the flood. But in the Qur'an, Noah comes to his people with a "clear warning" (v. 25) that they should "serve none but Allah" (v. 26). So the corruption and violence of which the people are guilty in the Biblical account in the Qur'an become simply idolatry, or more precisely, shirk, the association of partners with Allah.

Of course, Muhammad came to his people with a clear warning (14:52) that they should serve none but Allah (3:64), and so in this account Noah is kind of a proto-Muhammad, preaching a message identical to his. And that is, indeed, how Islam views all the Biblical prophets. They, like Muhammad, taught Islam – it was their followers who corrupted their teachings to create modern Judaism and Christianity. Even the reception Noah receives resembles how the pagan Quraysh received Muhammad. The unbelievers tell him he is just a man and charge him and his followers with lying (v. 27), and even claim he is forging the messages he claims are from Allah (v. 35). Noah counters by saying that it won't matter what he says to them if Allah has determined to lead them astray (v. 34). This, of course, almost exactly replicates Muhammad's experience: Allah tells him to tell the unbelievers that he is just a man (18:110); they charge him with lying (42:24) and with forging the Qur'an (v. 13); and of course Muhammad also teaches that if Allah wills to lead someone astray, no one can guide him (7:186).

Noah is, then, essentially a stand-in for Muhammad. Indirectly emphasized are the identity of the messages of all the prophets, and the obstinacy of the unbelievers before the manifest truth of Allah. One of those unbelievers is Noah's son, who declines to enter the ark and instead says, "I will betake myself to some mountain: it will save me from the water" (v. 43). His son dies in flood, and Noah reminds Allah of his promise to save his family (which came in v. 40): "O my Lord! Surely my son is of my family!" (v. 45). But Allah tells him, "O Noah! He is not of thy family: for his conduct is unrighteous" (v. 46). Belief and unbelief in Islam supersede even family ties. Ibn Kathir explains: "Thus, for his son, it had already been decreed that he would be drowned due to his disbelief and his opposition to his father."

The story of Hud (verses 50-60) follows a roughly similar pattern. He tells the people of 'Ad to repent (v. 52), but they complain that he has brought them no clear sign (v. 53), and are destroyed – although Hud and his people are saved (v. 58). Verses 61-68 repeat the same pattern in telling the story of Salih, who was sent sometime after Noah's time to the Thamud people, who lived in northern Arabia. Allah gives them a sign of his power: the "she-camel of Allah is a symbol to you" (v. 64) – which according to some traditions emerged miraculously from a mountain. The Thamud are told not to harm it, but they do anyway (v. 65) and are destroyed (v. 67), except for Salih and the believers (v. 66).

Verses 69-83 retell the Biblical story of Abraham, Sarah and Lot, culminating in the destruction of an unnamed Sodom and Gomorrah (v. 82) with a strong hint of an unnamed crime of sodomy (v. 79). Verses 83-95 tell the story of Shu'aib, prophet to the Midianites, in language very similar, and with an identical outcome, to the story of Hud.

Then verses 96-123 recapitulate many themes of the entire sura, with passing reference to Moses and Pharaoh (vv. 96-98). Both those who reject Allah and those who accept him will face a fearsome judgment, leading to hellfire for the unbelievers and Paradise for the believers (vv. 103-108). Allah gave Moses the Torah, but there are disputes about it (v. 110), which Allah would have already settled except that he has decided to "delay His chastisement from your nation," according to the *Tanwîr al-Miqbâs min Tafsîr Ibn 'Abbâs*. The believers should pray and be steadfast (vv. 114-115), for all this is Allah's will: "If thy Lord had so willed, He could have made mankind one people: but they will not cease to dispute" (v. 118). Yet believers must trust in him (v. 123).

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 12, "Joseph"

Sura 12, "Joseph," is another late Meccan sura. It was revealed, says Maududi, "when the Quraish" — the pagan Arabs of Mecca, and the tribe of which Muhammad was a member — "were considering the question of killing or exiling or imprisoning him." It tells the story of the patriarch Joseph, again — as we saw in sura 11 with the stories of other prophets — with a clear message relating to Muhammad and his opponents.

It begins in verses 1-3 with another panegyric to the Qur'an. Ibn Kathir expresses the mainstream Islamic view when he says: "The Arabic language is the most eloquent, plain, deep and expressive of the meanings that might arise in one's mind. Therefore, the most honorable Book, was revealed in the most honorable language, to the most honorable Prophet and Messenger, delivered by the most honorable angel, in the most honorable land on earth, and its revelation started during the most honorable month of the year, Ramadan. Therefore, the Qur'an is perfect in every respect." This is not, of course, a perspective that tends to be welcoming of critical examination of the book — as has [recently been in the news](#) with the discovery of 450 rolls of film of ancient manuscripts of the Qur'an.

Then verses 4-101 tell the story of Joseph. According to Maududi, one of the principal purposes of this account "was to apply it to the Quraish and warn them that ultimately the conflict between them and the Holy Prophet would end in his victory over them. As they were then persecuting their brother, the Holy Prophet, in the same way the brothers of Prophet Joseph had treated him....And just as the brothers of Prophet Joseph had to humble themselves before him, so one day the Quraish shall have to beg forgiveness from their brother whom they were then trying to crush down." He points to verse 7, "Verily in Joseph and his brethren are signs for seekers," as referring to the Quraysh, who should heed the warning given them in this sura.

The Qur'anic tale of Joseph is an abbreviated version of the story in Genesis 37-50, with some notable differences from the Biblical account. Joseph has a dream that eleven stars and the sun and the moon prostrate themselves to him (v. 4) — that is, his parents and brothers. Dreams are to be taken seriously: according to 'Abdullah bin 'Abbas, "the dreams of Prophets are revelations from Allah." Muhammad himself explained this as not applying just to the prophets, but as a general principle: "A good dream is from Allah, and a bad dream is from Satan. So if anyone of you sees (in a dream) something he dislikes, when he gets up he should blow thrice (on his left side) and seek refuge with Allah from its evil, for then it will not harm him."

The brothers, jealous, want to kill him (v. 9), but finally decide to throw him down a well and tell their father, Jacob, that he is dead (vv. 15-18). In a departure from the Biblical account, Jacob doesn't believe them (v. 18). The Tanwîr al-Miqbâs min Tafsîr Ibn 'Abbâs says "he did not believe them because in another occasion they said that Joseph was killed by thieves."

Anyway, then Joseph, sold into slavery in Egypt, is the target of an attempted seduction by the ruler's wife (v. 30). Another detail not contained in the Biblical account is that Joseph "would have desired her," except that Allah warded him off "from him evil and lewdness. Lo! He was of Our chosen slaves" (v. 24). The sharp dualism in Islam appears as Maududi sees a lesson in this: "Contrast the former characters [Jacob and Joseph] molded by Islam on the bedrock of the worship of Allah and accountability in the Hereafter with the latter molded by kufr [unbelief] and 'ignorance' on the worship of the world and disregard of Allah and the Hereafter..." She accuses him of impropriety (v. 25), but Joseph's innocence is established when it is found that his cloak is torn in the back, not in the front — he was, in other words, fleeing from her (vv. 27-28). Her husband laments: "Lo! this is of the guile of you women. Lo! The guile of you is very great" (v. 28).

The wife then holds a banquet for the women of the city, who are so awed by Joseph's good looks that they begin cutting their hands (v. 31). Ibn Kathir explains: "They thought highly of him and were astonished at what they saw. They started cutting their hands in amazement at his beauty, while thinking that they were cutting the citron with their knives." The ruler's wife felt exonerated: "When they felt the pain, they started screaming and she said to them, 'You did all this from one look at him, so how can I be blamed?'"

Joseph is ultimately imprisoned (v. 35). When two fellow prisoners ask him to interpret their dreams (v. 36), he first tells them that he is a good Muslim: he has "abandoned the ways of a people that believe not in Allah" (v. 37). He follows the religion of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and "never could we attribute any partners whatever to Allah" (v. 38). He languishes in prison for awhile longer, but ultimately gets a chance to interpret the king's dream (vv. 46-49). The ruler's wife confesses her wrongdoing (v. 51) and so Joseph is freed and rewarded (vv. 54-56). Joseph's brothers come to him for help during the famine, not recognizing him (v. 58); Joseph demands that they bring their youngest brother (v. 60). Muhammad Asad explains how the story then unfolds: "Joseph had wanted to keep Benjamin with himself, but under the law of Egypt he could not do this without the consent of his half-brothers." But when the goblet is discovered in his brother's bag, "Benjamin appeared to be guilty of theft, and under the law of the land Joseph was entitled to claim him as his slave, and thus to keep him in his house." The point of the Qur'anic story is that Allah orders all events, and none can thwart his will: "Thus did We contrive for Joseph. He could not have taken his brother according to the king's law unless Allah willed" (v. 76). Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers (v. 90), who beg Allah's forgiveness (v. 91) and receive it (v. 92, 98). Jacob and his brothers go live with Joseph in Egypt (vv. 99-100).

Verses 102-111 emphasize that all this is a warning. Allah tells Muhammad that he revealed the story of Joseph to him "by inspiration," for Muhammad was not present when Joseph's brothers plotted against him, so how could he know how it happened unless he is a true prophet (v. 102)? Still, most will not believe (vv. 103, 105, 106), although this is not an invented tale, but a confirmation of existing Scripture (v. 111) – which Scriptures, of course, to Muhammad's great vexation, did not actually confirm his message.

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 13, "The Thunder"

This sura dates, like suras 6, 7, 10, 11, and 12, from late in the Meccan period, the first period of Muhammad's career as a prophet. Its name comes a phrase in v. 13, "the thunder repeats his praises." Its main theme is summed up by v. 1, in which Allah tells Muhammad, "These are the signs" — ayat, verses — "of the Book: that which hath been revealed unto thee from thy Lord is the Truth; but most men believe not."

Ibn Kathir sees the four Arabic letters that begin this chapter, and similar unexplained letters beginning many suras of the Qur'an, as confirmation of its miraculous character: "Every Surah that starts with separate letters affirms that the Qur'an is miraculous and is an evidence that it is a revelation from Allah, and that there is no doubt or denying in this fact." Despite the mystery of these letters, however, he goes on to assert that the Qur'an is "clear, plain and unequivocal," and that "most men will still not believe, due to their rebellion, stubbornness and hypocrisy." The Tafsir al-Jalalayn and the Tanwîr al-Miqbâs min Tafsîr Ibn 'Abbâs say that the "most people" who will not believe according to v. 1 are the people of Mecca.

In what should they believe? Verses 2-19 emphasize Allah's power in all things. Allah "raised the heavens without any pillars that ye can see" (v. 2) — a physical image that Ibn Kathir expands upon in a physical way: "The distance between the first heaven and the earth is five hundred years from every direction, and its thickness is also five hundred years. The second heaven surrounds the first heaven from every direction, encompassing everything that the latter carries, with a thickness also of five hundred years and a distance between them of five hundred years."

This is not to say that Islam envisions a physical Allah — the Allah whom "no vision can grasp" (6:103) and who is "nearer than the jugular vein" (50:16) is not physical, but this is the subject of some [Sunni-Shi'ite polemics](#). Some argue that even though Allah is nearer than the jugular vein, he is not everywhere. [Some modern Muslims](#) argue that to affirm otherwise would be to fall into pantheism and shirk: the association of partners with Allah, the cardinal sin in Islam. They argue this from the fact that Allah has "mounted the Throne" (v. 2; also 7:54). The Imam Abul Hasan al-Ash'ari (874-936) argued against the claim of the rationalist-minded Mu'tazilite sect that this verse meant that Allah was everywhere. "If it were as they asserted," he asked, "then what difference would there be between the Throne and the earth?" And the tenth century scholar of hadith Ibn Khuzaymah declared: "Whoever does not affirm that Allah is above His heavens, upon His Throne and that He is distinct from His creation; must be forced to repent. If he does not repent, then he must be beheaded and then thrown into a garbage dump, so that the Muslims and the Ahl-Dhimma (the Christians and the Jew) will not suffer from his stinking smell."

In all of creation are "signs for those who consider" (v. 3). Verses 2-4, 8-13, and 16-17 see his power in creation: the sun and moon are subject to him (v. 2, a verse to ponder for those who equate Allah with the moon god); he sees all things (vv. 8-9); he shows mankind "the lightning, by way both of fear and of hope" (v. 13). But the unbelievers, perverse as ever, ask Muhammad "to hasten on the evil in preference to the good" (v. 6) — that is, they ask him in derision to bring divine chastisements upon them, according to the Tanwîr al-Miqbâs min Tafsîr Ibn 'Abbâs, and demand miracles (v. 7). Each believer, meanwhile is guarded by angels (v. 11). Ibn Kathir says that there are four: two guards, one in back and one in front, and two who record the Muslim's good and bad deeds. The believer greets the recording angels during prayer, turning to his right and left shoulder and saying each time, "Peace be upon you."

The same verse suggests that people really do have free will: "Allah does not change a people's lot unless they change what is in their hearts" (v. 11). The Tafsir al-Jalalayn explains: "He does not deprive them of His grace — unless they have altered the state of their souls, from [their] comely

nature, through an act of disobedience.” Yet it is hard to see how this fits in with the idea that “had Allah willed, He could have guided all mankind” (v. 31); “those whom Allah leaves to stray, no one can guide” (v. 33); and other passages that state that one’s belief or unbelief is up to Allah (10:99-100). In Islamic history the idea of free will was early on declared heretical. The twelfth-century Hanbali jurist [Ibn Abi Ya’la describes](#) the Qadari sect, which affirmed free will: “They are those who claim that they possess in full the capacity to act (al-istitâ’a), free will (al-mashî’a), and effective power (al-qudra). They consider that they hold in their grasp the ability to do good and evil, avoid harm and obtain benefit, obey and disobey, and be guided or misguided. They claim that human beings retain full initiative, without any prior status within the will of Allâh for their acts, nor even in His knowledge of them. Their doctrine is similar to that of Zoroastrians and Christians. It is the very root of heresy.”

Verses 20-43 repeat familiar themes: the righteous will enter Paradise (vv. 20-24, 35); those who break Allah’s covenant are accursed (v. 25); the unbelievers demand a sign (v. 27) and will be punished in this world and the next (v. 34); the unbelievers ascribe partners to Allah (v. 33) and reject part of the Qur’an (v. 36), while the believers do the opposite. V. 31, with its reference to “a Qur’an with which mountains were moved, or the earth were cloven asunder, or the dead were made to speak,” refers to the unbelievers’ demand for a miracle. The Tafsir al-Jalalayn explains that it was “revealed when they said to him, ‘If you are [truly] a prophet, then make these mountains of Mecca drift away before us, and make for us rivers and springs in it, that we may plant and sow seeds, and resurrect for us our dead fathers to speak to us and tell us that you are a prophet.’” But even if those things happened, they still wouldn’t believe.

The Tafsir al-Jalalayn says that the phrase “Allah doth blot out or confirm what He pleaseth: with Him is the Mother of the Book” (v. 39) refers to the Qur’an: “God effaces, of it [the Book], whatever He will and He fixes therein whatever He will of rulings or other matters, and with Him is the Mother of the Book, its [source of] origin, of which nothing is ever changed, and which consists of what He inscribed in pre-eternity (azal).” This remains the orthodox view of the Qur’an: that it is a perfect, unchanging copy of the Mother of the Book that has existed forever with Allah.

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 14, "Abraham"

This is yet another late Meccan sura. Its name comes from v. 35, where Abraham appears and prays, but following the convention of the naming of Qur'an chapters, this name has little to do with the content of this sura; more is said about Abraham elsewhere in the Qur'an.

Verses 1-4 celebrate the "Book which We have revealed unto thee" (v. 1) — which is, of course, the Qur'an that was delivered to Muhammad. In the words of Ibn Kathir, it is "the most honored Book, that Allah sent down from heaven to the most honored Messenger of Allah sent to all the people of the earth, Arabs and non-Arabs alike."

With this Book, Muhammad can "lead mankind out of the depths of darkness into light" (v. 1) – the light of Allah – but of course for the unbelievers there is a terrible penalty in store (v. 2): "woe to them on the Day of Judgment because they defied you, O Muhammad, and rejected you," says Ibn Kathir. For they dared to prefer this world to the next and to keep people from the path of Allah, and they "seek therein something crooked" (v. 3) – that is, they are, in the words of Maulana Bulandshahri, "ever vigilant to expose any defect that they hope to find in the religion (D'in) of Islam." Yet Allah has sent messengers to people speaking in their own language so they can understand the message clearly (v. 4), but after that, says the Tafsir al-Jalalayn, "God then sends astray whomever He will and He guides whomever He will."

Then verses 5-15 return to the stories of Moses (vv. 5-8) and some of the other prophets (v. 9). The unbelievers "thrust their hands into their mouths" (v. 9) on hearing the messengers' clear proofs. "It is said," explains Ibn Kathir, "that they pointed to the Messengers' mouths asking them to stop calling them to Allah, the Exalted and Most Honored. It is also said that it means, they placed their hands on their mouths in denial of the Messengers. It was also said that it means that they did not answer the call of the Messengers, or they were biting their hands in rage." Then comes a dialogue between the unbelievers and the messengers (vv. 10-15) that appears to be meant to apply to all the experiences of all the prophets Allah has sent to the world, but which once again, as we have seen in other late Meccan suras, closely traces and universalizes Muhammad's dealings with his own people, the pagan Quraysh of Mecca. Maulana Maududi makes this clear when he explains that v. 13, "The disbelievers warned their Messengers, 'You shall have to return to our community or we will assuredly expel you from our land,'" is a reference to a threat the Quraysh had issued to Muhammad: the verse "clearly indicates," he says, "that the persecution of the Muslims was at its worst at the time of the revelation of this Surah, and the people of Makkah were bent on expelling the Believers from there like the disbelievers of the former Prophets."

But Allah will turn the tables on the unbelievers: "Verily we shall destroy the wrong-doers, and verily We shall make you" – that is, Muhammad and the Muslims – "to dwell in the land after them" (vv. 13-14).

This leads to more warnings for the unbeliever in verses 16-23: "In front of such a one is Hell, and he is given, for drink, boiling fetid water" (v. 16). They will suffer "chastisement unrelenting" (v. 17) and their work in this world will come to nothing (v. 18). Allah can even replace the entire creation if he wishes (v. 20). On Judgment Day, the weak will blame the arrogant (v. 21), and Satan will acknowledge that while both he and Allah made promises to people, he – Satan – proved to be a betrayer (v. 22). According to Ibn Jarir, Satan will tell the unbelievers at that point, when it's too late: "I deny being a partner with Allah, the Exalted and Most Honored." And "Iblis [Satan]," says Ibn Kathir, "may Allah curse him, will stand and address" those whom he led astray, "in order to add depression to their depression, sorrow to their sorrow and grief to their grief." No mention is made, however, of the conundrum created by Allah's leading people astray. The righteous, in any case, will enter "gardens beneath which rivers flow" (v. 23).

Verses 24-27 compare the word of Allah to a strong tree and the “evil Word” to a tree without roots, reminiscent of Jesus’ parable in Matthew 7:17-19 (see also 7:24-27). Muhammad once told his companions, “There is a tree among the trees which is as blessed as a Muslim,” and explained, “It is the datepalm tree.” This may have been because of the spiritual powers of dates. Muhammad also said: “He who eats seven ‘Ajwa dates every morning, will not be affected by poison or magic on the day he eats them.” Allah will strengthen the believers in this world and the next (v. 27); Muhammad explained: “When a Muslim is questioned in his grave, he will testify that none has the right to be worshipped but Allah and that Muhammad is Allah’s Apostle, and that is what is meant by Allah’s statement” in v. 27.

Verses 28-34 again warn the unbelievers of hellfire and remind them of Allah’s blessings. In a hadith, Muhammad identifies “those who have changed the favor of Allah into blasphemy” (v. 28) as “the disbelieving pagans of Mecca,” thus reinforcing Maududi’s impression of this sura as a warning to the Quraysh when tensions between them and the Muslims were high.

In verses 35-41 Abraham prays that Allah will make Mecca a city of “peace and security” (v. 35) and for his children, some of whom he has made to “dwell in a valley without cultivation, by Thy Sacred House” – that is, the Ka’aba, which Abraham built, according to Islamic tradition. That the land is barren makes them dependent upon the good will of those in the area: Abraham asks Allah to “fill the hearts of some among men with love towards them, and feed them with fruits” (v. 37). However, according to Ibn ‘Abbas, Mujahid and Sa’id bin Jubayr, this is restricted to Muslims only: “Had Ibrahim said, ‘The hearts of mankind’, Persians, Romans, the Jews, the Christians and all other people would have gathered around” the Ka’aba. But Abraham, they explain, said “some among men,” thus “making it exclusive to Muslims only.”

According to one of Muhammad’s companions, Abdullah bin Amr, Muhammad recited part of Abraham’s prayer here – “They have indeed led astray many among mankind” (v. 36) – and wept, crying out three times: “O Allah, Save my Ummah [community]!” In another indication of the importance of Muhammad to Allah, he sent Gabriel to the prophet with these instructions: “Go to Muhammad and tell him this; ‘We will make you pleased with your Ummah, O Muhammad, and will not treat them in a way you dislike.’”

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 15, "Rock City"

Sura 15 is entitled Al-Hijr, which is translated variously as "The Valley of Stone," "Stoneland," "Rock City," "Rocky Tract," etc. Many translations do not render it in English at all, since it is a place name, referred to in v. 80 – Al-Hijr was yet another place that rejected the messengers of Allah and was destroyed. This is another late Meccan sura, revealed at a time of great tension between the Muslims and the pagan Quraysh of Mecca – and at a time when Muhammad himself was apparently feeling a bit discouraged, so that Allah makes some effort to cheer him up.

Verses 1-15 excoriate the perversity of the unbelievers. The Qur'an "makes things clear" (v. 1), and those who reject Islam will one day wish they had become Muslims (v. 2). According to Ibn 'Abbas and Anas bin Malik, as well as Abu Musa, this verse responds to the taunts of the unbelievers to the sinful Muslims in hell. When the idolaters tell the Muslims that "what you used to worship on earth has not helped you," Allah will be angry, and will remove the sinful Muslims from hell – and then the unbelievers, left in hell, will wish they had accepted Islam. But meanwhile, Muhammad should let the unbelievers enjoy life (v. 3), knowing that no one can escape the doom decreed by Allah (vv. 4-5). This sura seems to envision that doom as coming on the Day of Judgment, but later in Muhammad's prophetic career, as we have seen in sura 9 and elsewhere, he began to see himself and the Muslims and instruments of Allah's wrath for the unbelievers, including Jews and Christians.

The unbelievers mock Muhammad, calling him a madman (v. 6) and asking him for a miracle – to show them the angels (v. 7). But Allah doesn't send angels to earth without good reason, and if he did, it would be to punish the unbelievers (v. 8). Allah will protect the Qur'an (v. 9), "against," says the Tafsir al-Jalalayn, "substitution, distortion, additions and omissions." That is why the [prospect of alternate Qur'anic texts](#) is so dangerous from a Muslim perspective – genuine alternate readings of the Qur'an would negate Allah's promise in this verse.

Ibn Kathir explains vv. 11-13: "Consoling His Messenger for the rejection of the disbelieving Quraysh, Allah says that He has sent Messengers before him to the nations of the past, and no Messenger came to a nation but they rejected him and mocked him. Then He tells him that He lets disbelief enter the hearts of those sinners who are too stubborn and too arrogant to follow His guidance." Here again, disbelief is a matter of the will of Allah, which cannot be rejected or overridden. But the unbelievers will not accept Islam even if they see tremendous visions (vv. 14-15).

Verses 16-27 speak of Allah's creative power in fashioning the universe. We are reminded that he created various things, culminating in this arresting passage: "And verily, it is We Who give life, and Who give death: it is We Who are the Inheritor" (v. 23) – that is, the one who survives when all else perishes. Allah guards mankind from "every cursed devil" (v. 17), except "any that gains a hearing by stealth, is pursued by a flaming fire, bright" (v. 18). This is explained more fully in sura 37:7-10, where we learn that the rebellious spirits try to listen in to the goings-on of the "Exalted Assembly," but cannot, as they are repulsed by a bright flame. Allah created human beings from "potter's clay of black mud altered" (v. 26), and the jinn from "the fire of a scorching wind" (v. 27).

Verses 28-42 recount the creation of Adam, paralleling suras 2:30-39 and 7:11-25. Satan refuses Allah's command to prostrate himself before Adam (v. 31), and is duly expelled from Paradise (v. 34), but is granted respite (v. 37), whereupon he vows to spend his time leading human beings astray (v. 39) – except Allah's servants (v. 40), although Allah reveals one exception, telling Satan: "For over My servants no authority shalt thou have, except such as put themselves in the wrong and follow thee" (v. 42). The Tafsir al-Jalalayn explains that the two groups in this verse are simply believers and unbelievers: "in other words, truly over My servants, that is, believers, you shall have

no warrant, [no] power, except those who follow you from among the perverse, the disbelievers.”

Verses 43-50 return to the pains of hell and the joys of Paradise. Hell has seven gates (v. 44). According to Ruhul Ma’ani, the Jews, the Christians, the polytheists, the hypocrites and others each get their own gate. Then verses 51-77 tell the story of Abraham, Lot, and the unnamed Sodom and Gomorrah – the account found in Genesis 17-19. Like other Qur’anic retellings of Biblical stories, the Qur’anic account is streamlined and shorn of subplots, so as to focus sharply on the rejection of truth and subsequent punishment of the disbelievers. Abraham’s visitors, messengers from Allah (v. 57), tell him that he will become a father despite his advanced age (vv. 53-55) and that they have come to rescue Lot and his people, except his wife (v. 60), as they punish the evildoers. Those evildoers come looking for the young men (v. 67) – that is, the messengers – but Lot pleads with them to take his daughters instead (v. 71). The city is destroyed (v. 74). Verses 78-84 recount the similar destruction of the “Companions of the Wood” (v. 78) and the “Companions of Rock City” (v. 80).

Finally, in verses 85-99 Allah consoles Muhammad for the rejection and ridicule that he has encountered from the unbelievers. He has shown great favor to Muhammad and the Muslims, giving them the “seven oft-repeated” verses – that is, sura 1, the Fatihah, the most often-repeated prayer in Islam, and the Qur’an. They should not be envious of what Allah has given to other men, or grieve over the unbelievers (v. 88) – the Muslims should, in the words of Ibn Kathir, “be content with the Grand Qur’an that Allah has given to you, and do not long for the luxuries and transient delights that they have.” Those who have “made the Qur’an into parts” (v. 91) are, according to Ibn ‘Abbas, “the People of the Book, who divided the Book into parts, believing in some of it, and rejecting some of it.” Others, however, say that it refers to the Quraysh, who, by charging that Muhammad was insane or possessed, were making the Qur’an into parts. According to Ibn Ishaq, the Quraysh held a meeting on who they thought Muhammad really was, considering the possibility that he might be a soothsayer, or crazy, or a poet, or a sorcerer, before finally deciding on the latter and triggering the revelation of v. 94), until “there come unto thee the Hour that is Certain” (v. 99).

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 16, "The Bee"

Sura 16, "The Bee," is another in the string of late Meccan suras that began with sura 10. Its title comes from v. 68, which tells us that Allah taught the bee to do what bees do.

Verses 1-19 emphasize that Allah has created all things, and provides for all of humanity's needs, and that all created beings bear witness to him. Ibn Kathir says that the "ways that turn aside" from the Straight Path of Islam (v. 9) are "various opinions and whims, such as Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism." The *Tanwîr al-Miqbâs min Tafsîr Ibn 'Abbâs* concurs, saying: "it is Allah Who guides to monotheism, and some of the religions are crooked and unjust such as Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism. And if Allah had willed, He would have guided you all to His religion." So once again, belief or unbelief is up to Allah, not to the individual.

Verses 20-42 highlight the perversity of the unbelievers, and their impending judgment by Allah. The objects of their worship are themselves created (v. 20), and they scoff that Muhammad's revelations amount only to "tales of the ancients" (v. 24). That is, they suggest that Muhammad wasn't receiving the words of Allah from Gabriel and transmitting them to the people, but only relating old stories: "they say," according to the *Tafsir al-Jalalayn*, [that] these [revelations] are, 'fables, lies, of the ancients', in order to lead people astray." On Judgment Day these people will not only bear the weight of their own sins, but "also (something) of the burdens of those without knowledge, whom they misled" (v. 25). They will be condemned to hell (v. 29), while the righteous will dwell in the bountiful gardens of Paradise (v. 32).

The unbelievers will complain that "if Allah had so willed," they and their forefathers never would have worshipped anyone but Allah (v. 35) – a reasonable complaint, in light of the Qur'an's repeated statements about Allah leading people astray and having the ability to make everyone believers if he had desired (see 10:99-100). But here this excuse is rejected, since Allah has sent messengers to every people, telling them to worship Allah alone (v. 36). Ibn Kathir tries to mitigate the harshness of the idea that if Allah had willed, all mankind would believe, by explaining that Allah doesn't actually want anyone to disbelieve, and sends them messengers so that they won't do so, but simply allows them to if they so choose: "The legislative will of Allah is clear and cannot be taken as an excuse by them, because He had forbidden them to do that upon the tongue of His Messengers, but by His universal will (i.e., by which He allows things to occur even though they do not please Him) He allowed them to do that as it was decreed for them. So there is no argument in that for them. Allah created Hell and its people both the Shayatin (devils) and disbelievers, but He does not like His servants to disbelieve." Allah does not guide those whom "He leaves to stray" (v. 37) — that is, Ibn Kathir continues, "the one whom He has caused to go astray, so who can guide him apart from Allah? No one." For Allah accomplishes everything he intends to do (v. 40), and "nothing," says Ibn Kathir, "can stop Him or oppose Him."

Meanwhile, "those who leave their homes in the cause of Allah" will be rewarded in both this world and the next (v. 41). They are, according to the *Tanwîr al-Miqbâs min Tafsîr Ibn 'Abbâs*, the Muslims who fled Mecca with Muhammad and settled in Medina; Ibn Kathir, however, identifies them as the Muslims who earlier fled to Abyssinia to escape the persecution of the pagan Quraysh.

Verses 43-96 repeat many of these themes: Allah will judge those who plot against the Muslims (vv. 45-47; 84-89); created things bear witness to him (v. 48-50; 64-69; 79-82); Allah is the only god (v. 51); Satan is the patron of those who reject Allah's messengers (v. 63); Muhammad's duty is only to warn people of the impending judgment (v. 82). The polytheists even dare to say that Allah has daughters, while they themselves have sons (v. 57). The *Tafsir al-Jalalayn* explains that "to Him they assign daughters, to whom they are averse, when [in any case] He is [exalted] beyond having offspring, while to themselves they assign sons, of their own choosing, so that the best is theirs

exclusively.” Allah’s sovereignty over all is reaffirmed in v. 93, which the Tafsir al-Jalalayn glosses as: “For if God had willed, He could have made you one community, people of a single religion, but He leads astray whom He will and guides whom He will, and you will surely be questioned, on the Day of Resurrection, a questioning of rebuke, about what you used to do, so that you might be requited for it.”

Verses 97-128 defend Muhammad and the Qur’an against some of the charges of the unbelievers, and call all people again to accept Muhammad’s message, which is the message of Abraham (v. 123), and worship Allah alone. Allah laments that whenever he abrogates a verse of his revelation and replaces it with another, the unbelievers accuse Muhammad of making it all up (v. 101). But actually Muhammad’s revelations come from the Holy Spirit (v. 102) – that is, Gabriel. The unbelievers claim that Muhammad is learning the contents of the Qur’an from a man and then passing them off as divine revelation, but the one they have in mind is a foreigner, while the Qur’an is in pure Arabic (v. 103). Ibn Kathir grants that “maybe the Messenger of Allah used to sit with him sometimes and talk to him a little, but he was a foreigner who did not know much Arabic, only enough simple phrases to answer questions when he had to.” Who was this mysterious foreigner whom the Qur’an is so anxious to diminish in importance? Some suggest Muhammad’s wife’s uncle Waraqa, who first identified him as a prophet, and who used to, according to Islamic tradition, “write from the Gospel in Hebrew as much as Allah wished him to write.” Or it may have been one of Muhammad’s early companions, Salman the Persian: the Arabic word translated here as “foreign” is Ajami, which also means Persian.

Then in v. 106, in a notable departure from the Christian concept of martyrdom, Allah allows Muslims to deny their faith when under “compulsion,” as long one’s heart remains “firm in Faith.” Ibn Kathir explains: “This is an exception in the case of one who utters statements of disbelief and verbally agrees with the Mushrikin [unbelievers] because he is forced to do so by the beatings and abuse to which he is subjected, but his heart refuses to accept what he is saying, and he is, in reality, at peace with his faith in Allah and His Messenger.” This is another foundation for the idea of religious deception in Islam, which we saw in discussing 3:28.

The sura ends with a brief discussion of food laws, and instructions to Muhammad to “invite (all) to the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching” (v. 125).

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 17, "The Night Journey," verse 1

Muhammad's famous Night Journey (Isra and Miraj) is the basis of the Islamic claim to Jerusalem as an Islamic holy city. The only thing the Qur'an has to say about it is this the first verse of sura 17, which says that Allah took Muhammad from "the Sacred Mosque" in Mecca "to the farthest [al-aqsa] Mosque." There was no mosque in Jerusalem at this time, so the "farthest" mosque probably wasn't really the one that now bears that name in Jerusalem, but Islamic tradition is firm that this mosque is in Jerusalem.

Muhammad's vision of this journey was as dramatic as his initial encounter with Gabriel. According to Ibn Ishaq, Muhammad described the vision to one of the Muslims as beginning "while I was lying in Al-Hatim or Al-Hijr," that is, an area in Mecca opposite the Ka'bah, identified by Islamic tradition as the burial place of Hagar and Ishmael, when "Gabriel came and stirred me with his foot." Soon after that "someone came to me and cut my body open from here to here" – and he gestured from his throat to his pubic area. The one who had come to him, Muhammad continued, "then took out my heart. Then a golden tray full of Belief was brought to me and my heart was washed and was filled (with Belief) and then returned to its original place. Then a white animal which was smaller than a mule and bigger than a donkey was brought to me." This was the Buraq, which Muhammad further described as "an animal white and long, larger than a donkey but smaller than a mule, who would place his hoof a distance equal to the range of vision." It was, he said, "half mule, half donkey, with wings on its sides with which it propelled its feet."

"When I came up to mount him," Muhammad reported according to Ibn Ishaq, "he shied. Gabriel placed his hand on its mane and said, 'Are you not ashamed, a Buraq, to behave in this way? By God, none more honorable before God than Muhammad has ever ridden you before.' The animal was so ashamed that he broke out into a sweat and stood still so that I could mount him."

They went to the Temple Mount, and from there to heaven itself. According to a hadith, Muhammad explained: "I was carried on it, and Gabriel set out with me till we reached the nearest heaven. When he asked for the gate to be opened, it was asked, 'Who is it?' Gabriel answered, 'Gabriel.' It was asked, 'Who is accompanying you?' Gabriel replied, 'Muhammad.' It was asked, 'Has Muhammad been called?' Gabriel replied in the affirmative. Then it was said, 'He is welcomed. What an excellent visit his is!'"

Muhammad entered the first heaven, where he encountered Adam. Gabriel prods Muhammad: "This is your father, Adam; pay him your greetings." The Prophet of Islam duly greets the first man, who responds, "You are welcome, O pious son and pious Prophet." Gabriel then carries Muhammad to the second heaven, where the scene at the gate is reenacted, and once inside, John the Baptist and Jesus greet him: "You are welcome, O pious brother and pious Prophet." In the third heaven, Joseph greets him in the same words, and Muhammad and Gabriel go on, greeted by other prophets at other levels of heaven.

In the sixth heaven is Moses, occasioning another dig at the Jews. "When I left him," Muhammad says, "he wept. Someone asked him, 'What makes you weep?' Moses said, 'I weep because after me there has been sent (Muhammad as a Prophet) a young man, whose followers will enter Paradise in greater numbers than my followers.'"

In the seventh heaven, Muhammad meets Abraham, has further visions, and receives the command that the Muslims pray fifty times daily. But returning, Muhammad passed by Moses, who asked him, "What have you been ordered to do?"

Muhammad replied, "I have been ordered to offer fifty prayers a day."

Moses offered him some advice: “Your followers cannot bear fifty prayers a day, and by Allah, I have tested people before you, and I have tried my level best with Bani Israel (in vain). Go back to your Lord and ask for reduction to lessen your followers’ burden.”

So Muhammad returned to Allah and got the number of daily prayers reduced to forty, but Moses still thought that was too many. Muhammad kept going between Allah and Moses until the number of daily prayers for the Muslims was only five. At this point Moses still doubted that Muhammad’s followers were up to this challenge: “Your followers cannot bear five prayers a day, and no doubt, I have got an experience of the people before you, and I have tried my level best with Bani Israel, so go back to your Lord and ask for reduction to lessen your follower’s burden.”

But this time Muhammad would not go back. “I have requested so much of my Lord that I feel ashamed, but I am satisfied now and surrender to Allah’s Order.”

The Prophet of Islam also described the other prophets for his followers: “On the night of my Al-Isra (Journey by Night) (to the heavens), I saw (the prophet) Musa (Moses) who was a thin person with lank hair, looking like one of the men of the tribe of Shanu’a; and I saw Isa (Jesus) who was of average height with red face as if he had just come out of a bathroom. And I resemble Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) more than any of his offspring does. Then I was given two cups, one containing milk and the other wine. Gabriel said, ‘Drink whichever you like.’ I took the milk and drank it. Gabriel said, ‘You have accepted what is natural, (True Religion i.e., Islam) and if you had taken the wine, your followers would have gone astray.’”

When they heard the stories of his Night Journey, the pagan Quraysh scoffed: “By God, this is a plain absurdity! A caravan takes a month to go to Syria and a month to return and can Muhammad do the return journey in one night?” Challenged by some who had been to Jerusalem, Muhammad claimed one further miracle in connection with the Night Journey: “When the people of Quraish did not believe me [i.e. the story of my Al-Isra (Night Journey)], I stood up in Al-Hijr [Rock City] and Allah displayed Jerusalem in front of me, and I began describing it to them while I was looking at it.”

Evidently, however, his descriptions weren’t altogether convincing: some Muslims abandoned their faith and challenged Muhammad’s most faithful follower, Abu Bakr, to do the same. According to Ibn Ishaq, Abu Bakr was contemptuous: “If he says so then it is true. And what is so surprising in that? He tells me that communications from God from heaven to earth come to him in an hour of a day or night and I believe him, and that is more extraordinary than that at which you boggle!”

Later Muhammad seems to have retreated from the claim that this was a bodily journey. His wife Aisha explained: “The apostle’s body remained where it was but God removed his spirit by night.”

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 17, "The Night Journey," verses 2-111

We have approaching the halfway point through the Qur'an in my Blogging the Qur'an series. There are 114 suras but since they are (roughly) arranged in order of length from the longest (sura 2) to the shortest, once you get through around sura 19 or 20 you're halfway through the book.

If you read the series you will see that I am not giving my own assessments of the meaning of various passages, but rather showing how mainstream, orthodox Muslim commentators have viewed and explained them. As such I present it as an aid to understanding the mindset of the jihadists who have vowed to destroy the West. The Qur'an is little read and even less understood by Western policymakers, and when jihadists have frequent recourse to it in explaining what they are doing and why, and gaining recruits within the Muslim community, that is unwise.

Anyway, here is sura 17, verses 2-111:

Muhammad was especially proud of sura 17, which goes by the titles "The Night Journey" and "The Tribe of Israel." Of suras 17, 18, and 19 he said: "They are among the earliest and most beautiful Surahs and they are my treasure." And according to his favorite wife, Aisha, he "used to recite Bani Isra'il [sura 17] and Az-Zumar [sura 39] every night."

After the cryptic allusion to the Night Journey in verse 1, it continues (verses 2-8) with a warning to the Jews. Allah previously warned them that twice they "would they do mischief on the earth and be elated with mighty arrogance" (v. 4). Ibn Kathir elaborates: "Allah tells us that He made a declaration to the Children of Israel in the Scripture, meaning that He had already told them in the Book which He revealed to them, that they would cause mischief on the earth twice, and would become tyrants and extremely arrogant, meaning they would become shameless oppressors of people." The crime of "mischief on the earth," *fasaad fi al-ardh*, is punishable according to 5:33 by crucifixion, or the amputation of hands and feet on opposite sides.

Who were the servants of Allah "given to terrible warfare" who entered the homes of the Jews? Ibn Kathir doesn't trust accounts from Jewish sources, apparently including Jewish Scriptures: "some of them are fabricated, concocted by their heretics, and others may be true, but we have no need of them, praise be to Allah. What Allah has told us in His Book (the Qur'an) is sufficient and we have no need of what is in the other books that came before. Neither Allah nor His Messenger required us to refer to them." For the Jews' disobedience to Allah "their humiliation and subjugation was a befitting punishment."

Then verses 9-21 repeat warnings of the impending judgment. No one can bear another's burdens (v. 15) – although 29:13 says that the unbelievers will "bear their own burdens, and burdens along with their own." Allah always sends messengers to a disobedient people before he destroys it (v. 16), and warns Muslims that those who long for the transitory things of this life will be given them, but will be punished in hell (v. 18).

Verses 22-39 enunciate a moral code, the "wisdom wherewith thy Lord hath inspired thee" – that is, Muhammad (v. 39). Muslims should:

1. Worship Allah alone (v. 22);
2. Be kind to their parents (v. 23);
3. Provide for their relatives, the needy, and travelers, and not be wasteful (v. 26);
4. Not kill their children for fear of poverty (v. 31);
5. Not commit adultery (v. 32);
6. Not "take life — which Allah has made sacred — except for just cause," and to make restitution

- for wrongful death (v. 33 – see the discussion here of 2:178);
- 7. Not seize the wealth of orphans (v. 34);
- 8. “Give full measure when ye measure, and weigh with a balance that is straight” (v. 35);
- 9. “Pursue not that of which thou hast no knowledge” (v. 36);
- 10. Not “walk on the earth with insolence” (v. 37).

Verses 40-71 once again excoriate the unbelievers for their perversity. The unbelievers “utter a most dreadful saying” in claiming that Allah has daughters, while they have sons (v. 40). The Qur’an reveals the truth, but only makes them resist it even more (v. 41). All creation reveals Allah’s glory (v. 44). Allah prevents the unbelievers from understanding the Qur’an (v. 46), and they accuse Muhammad of being “bewitched” (v. 47). They deny that Allah can restore the dead to life (vv. 49-52, cf. 98-99), yet their idols have no power (vv. 56, 67). All populations will be destroyed utterly or at least punished (v. 58), but Allah doesn’t send a miracle to confirm Muhammad’s message because others rejected miracles in the past (v. 59). The refusal of Satan to bow down to Adam is retold in vv. 61-65 – see [the discussion of 7:11-25](#). The unbelievers should be mindful that Allah might bring a natural disaster upon them (vv. 68-69).

The unbelievers even tried to tempt Muhammad away from the truth (verses 72-77). There are varying accounts of what form this temptation took. The Ruhul Ma’ani says that the pagan Quraysh asked Muhammad to replace the verses announcing Allah’s punishment with verses about his mercy, and vice versa – which would make the verses of mercy much more plentiful. But Allah kept Muhammad from being thus beguiled.

Verses 78-100 reiterate many of the same themes, returning most often to the wonders of the Qur’an itself. The Qur’an is “a healing and a mercy to those who believe,” while “to the unjust it causes nothing but loss after loss” (v. 82). The “whole of mankind and Jinns,” working together, couldn’t produce anything like it (v. 88). Yet still men are ungrateful (v. 89) and demand a miracle, which they will not get (vv. 90-96). No one can guide one whom Allah leaves straying (v. 97).

Verses 101-111 begin by returning to the story of Moses with Pharaoh, recounting that Allah gave Moses “nine clear signs,” but Pharaoh remained obstinate and denied Moses’ claims in language reminiscent of the Quraysh’s dismissal of Muhammad in v. 47 (v. 101). Allah gives the children of Israel the land (v. 104) – that is, Jordan and Palestine, according to the Tanwîr al-Miqbâs min Tafsîr Ibn ‘Abbâs. There are several prominent “moderate” Muslims who have made much of this, telling Jewish groups that the Qur’an guarantees Jews the land of Israel without getting around to telling them also that the Qur’an also says Jews are accursed for rejecting Muhammad (2:89) and that the Muslims are the true children of Abraham (3:67-68) and thus the true inheritors of this promise.

The sura concludes with more praise of the Qur’an, which has brought the truth, such that the pious receive it with grateful humility (vv. 105-109). Then comes Allah’s instruction to Muhammad to say, “Call upon Allah, or call upon Rahman [the Compassionate]: by whatever name ye call upon Him, for to Him belong the Most Beautiful Names” (v. 110). Apparently, the Meccans thought that Al-Rahman, the middle term of the Islamic invocation Bismillah Al-Rahman Al-Rahim, “In the name of Allah, the compassionate, the merciful,” was a deity distinct from Allah, and Muhammad is to tell them that they are but two different names for the same being. According to Ibn Kathir, “one of the idolators heard the Prophet saying when he was prostrating: ‘O Most Gracious, O Most Merciful.’ The idolator said, he claims to pray to One, but he is praying to two! Then Allah revealed this Ayah [verse, or sign].” Several historians have noted that Al-Rahman was the name of a pagan god in pre-Islamic Arabia, and was also used frequently by Jews and Christians — suggesting that Muhammad was trying to bring together several conceptions of the divine in order to unite the peoples of Arabia under Islam. There is even a hint of this in the Qur’an, when the unbelievers exclaim: “Has he made the gods (all) into one Allah? Truly this is a wonderful thing!” (38:5).

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 18, "The Cave," verses 1-59

Sura 18, "The Cave," another Meccan sura, occupies a unique place in Muslim piety. Muhammad said that one who memorized the first ten verses of this chapter (or, in some versions, the last ten) would "be secure against the Dajjal" – the Islamic version of the anti-Christ. Another ahadith has him saying that if a Muslim recites Sura 18 on Friday, "it will illuminate him with light from one Friday to the next." Another version says that one who does this will be "immune for 8 days from all fitnah [upheaval, sedition] that will happen." It also contains, as we shall see, some key material for Islamic folklore and Sufi mysticism.

According to Ibn Ishaq, this chapter was revealed after the pagan Quraysh sent an emissary to the Jewish rabbis of Medina, asking them about Muhammad's prophetic claims. The rabbis responded: "Ask him about three things which we will tell you to ask, and if he answers them then he is a Prophet who has been sent (by Allah); if he does not, then he is saying things that are not true, in which case how you will deal with him will be up to you. Ask him about some young men in ancient times, what was their story. For theirs is a strange and wondrous tale." That story is in verses 9-26.

The rabbis continued: "Ask him about a man who travelled a great deal and reached the east and the west of the earth. What was his story?" That story is in verses 83-98. "And ask him about the Ruh (soul or spirit) — what is it? If he tells you about these things, then he is a Prophet, so follow him, but if he does not tell you, then he is a man who is making things up, so deal with him as you see fit." So this sura is offered, at least in this view, as a validation of Muhammad's claim to be a prophet.

Verses 1-8 serve as an introduction, praising the Qur'an, in which there is no "crookedness" (v. 1). Maulana Bulandshahri comments: "This means that there are neither iniquities nor muddling of words in the Qur'an. There is also no shortage of eloquence in it, nor any discrepancies." Allah has made it clear in order to warn the unbelievers of his impending terrible punishment (v. 2), as well as to warn those who say Allah has begotten a Son (v. 4) – that is, the Christians, as well as the Jews who, according to 9:30, claimed that Ezra was the son of God.

Allah consoles Muhammad for his grief over the unbelievers' obstinacy (v. 6), and reminds him that the attractions of this life are merely a test (v. 7).

Then verses 9-26 tell the story of the "companions of the Cave and of the Inscription" (Al-Kahf and Ar-Raqim, v. 9). Al-Kahf is the cave in which the young men slept for 300 or 309 years (v. 25, with the difference being the discrepancy between the solar and lunar calendars), miraculously protected by Allah. There is no agreement on the meaning of Al-Raqim; some say it refers to a nearby valley or mountain, while Anas and Sha'bi contend it was the name of their dog, who was with them and is mentioned in verses 18 and 22. Sa'id bin Jubayr said it was "a tablet of stone on which they wrote the story of the people of the Cave, then they placed it at the entrance to the Cave" – hence, "the Inscription."

These were, according to Ibn Kathir, "boys or young men" who were "more accepting of the truth and more guided than the elders who had become stubbornly set in their ways and clung to the religion of falsehood." They acknowledge the oneness of Allah and reject the idols of their people; Allah protects them from the idolaters by sheltering them in the cave (vv. 14-16).

Although the young men remained in the cave for three centuries, when they were asked how long they had been there, they answered: "We have stayed (perhaps) a day, or part of a day" (v. 19). Allah "turned them on their right and on their left sides" (v. 18) – presumably to preserve their

bodies from decay while they slept, for, says Ibn Abbas, “If they did not turn over, the earth would have consumed them.” Their dog, meanwhile, was “stretching forth his two fore-legs on the threshold” (v. 18) – in other words, he wasn’t precisely inside the cave, so that he wouldn’t keep angels from entering it. “He was sitting outside the door,” explains Ibn Kathir, “because the angels do not enter a house in which there is a dog, as was reported in As-Sahih, nor do they enter a house in which there is an image, a person in a state of ritual impurity or a disbeliever, as was narrated in the Hasan Hadith.” Bukhari records that tradition, in which Muhammad says: “Angels do not enter a house wherein there is a dog or a picture of a living creature.” Nevertheless, continues Ibn Kathir: “The blessing they enjoyed extended to their dog, so the sleep that overtook them overtook him too. This is the benefit of accompanying good people, and so this dog attained fame and stature. It was said that he was the hunting dog of one of the people which is the more appropriate view, or that he was the dog of the king’s cook, who shared their religious views, and brought his dog with him.”

This is an adaptation of the Christian story of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus (although the Qur’an is less sure of their number – see v. 22), who are revered as saints in Byzantine Christianity. These are young men who sought refuge in a cave from the pagans in the pre-Christian Roman Empire, were miraculously protected, and who woke up after the Empire had been Christianized. (Ibn Kathir, however, thinks the story is pre-Christian, since the Jewish rabbis know of it and ask Muhammad about it as one of their tests of his prophethood.)

In verses 27-44, after a brief invocation of the gardens of Paradise (vv. 27-31), there comes an extended parable about a man who valued the things of this world more than obedience to Allah. The message is the same as that of Luke 12:15-21: “Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”

Then verses 45-59 repeat warnings of the impending Day of Judgment (v. 49). Satan’s refusal to bow down to Adam is recalled again, and Allah warns people not to follow Satan in his disobedience (v. 50). Here Satan is identified as one of the jinns, as opposed to his identification as an angel elsewhere – see [the discussion](#) of 7:11-25. Those whom the unbelievers have associated as partners with Allah will be of no avail on that Day (v. 52). Allah has sent messengers, but the unbelievers scoff at them (v. 56). They will be destroyed (v. 59).

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 18, "The Cave," verses 60-82

Sura 18's importance in Muslim piety, noted last week, is affirmed in numerous ahadith. In one, a man was reciting the sura when "a cloud came down and spread over that man, and it kept on coming closer and closer to him till his horse started jumping (as if afraid of something). When it was morning, the man came to the Prophet, and told him of that experience. The Prophet said, 'That was As-Sakina (tranquility) which descended because of (the recitation of) the Qur'an.'" As-Sakina is an adaptation of the Hebrew Shekinah, which refers in Jewish tradition to God's presence in the world, and the cloud clearly recalls the cloud that accompanies God's presence in Biblical passages such as Exodus 40:35. Like other Biblical concepts imported into Islam – notably, Jesus as the "Word of God" — it doesn't have this strong a connotation in Islamic thought.

Verses 60-82 of Sura 18 contain one of the strangest, most arresting stories in the entire Qur'an: that of the journey of Moses and Khidr, one of the great road-trip stories of all time. Moses, traveling with his servant, forgets the fish they had carried along for their meal (vv. 60-64). Returning to retrieve it, they encounter "one of Our servants, on whom We had bestowed Mercy from Ourselves and whom We had taught knowledge from Our own Presence," (v. 65). In Islamic tradition this man is identified as Al-Khadir or Al-Khidr, or, more commonly, Khidr, "the Green Man." Some identify him as one of the prophets, others as a wali, a Muslim saint. Abu Hayyan Al-Gharnati, a fourteenth-century commentator on the Qur'an, points to v. 82, in which Khidr says he didn't act "of my own accord," to argue that he was a prophet – for if he was prompted by someone else, who could have prompted a man so holy as to instruct a prophet like Moses except Allah himself? However, another fourteenth-century Islamic scholar, Ibn Taymiyya, noted that "the majority of the 'ulema [Islamic scholars] believe that he was not a Prophet."

Anyway, at the beginning of their encounter, Moses asks Khidr: "May I follow thee," so that "thou teach me something of the (Higher) Truth which thou hast been taught?" Khidr is leery (vv. 67-68), and finally agrees as long as Moses asks him no questions (v. 70). Moses agrees.

Khidr and Moses then get on a boat, which Khidr immediately scuttles – whereupon Moses breaks his promise for the first time, and upbraids Khidr (v. 71); Khidr reminds him of his promise (vv. 72-73). Shortly thereafter, Khidr murders a young man in an apparently random act, and Moses criticizes him again (v. 74), with the same exchange about the promise then following (vv. 75-76). Finally, Khidr rebuilds a wall that had fallen down in a town that had refused the two hospitality, and Moses scolds him yet again (v. 77), for he could have gotten wages for his action, which the two could have used to buy food and lodging.

Finally Khidr tells Moses that their journey is over, and explains his strange actions. (Muhammad commented: "We wished that Moses could have remained patient by virtue of which Allah might have told us more about their story.") Khidr damaged the ship because a king is seizing "every boat by force," but not ones that are unserviceable (v. 79) – presumably the poor owners of the boat could repair it once the king passed by. Khidr killed the young man because he would grieve his pious parents with his "rebellion and ingratitude" (v. 80), and Allah will give them a better son (v. 81). And as for the wall, there was buried treasure beneath it that belonged to boys too young to inherit it at this point — so repairing it gave them time to reach maturity while protecting the treasure from theft (v. 82).

Maududi enunciates the point of all this: "You should have full faith in the wisdom of what is happening in the Divine Factory in accordance with the will of Allah. As the reality is hidden from you, you are at a loss to understand the wisdom of what is happening, and sometimes if it appears that things are going against you, you cry out, 'How and why has this happened'. The fact is that if the curtain be removed from the 'unseen', you would yourselves come to know that what is

happening here is for the best. Even if some times it appears that something is going against you, you will see that in the end it also produces some good results for you.’”

The Qur’an translator Abdullah Yusuf Ali offers these four lessons from the story, including the idea that “even as the whole stock of the knowledge of the present day, the sciences and the arts, and in literature, (if it could be supposed to be gathered in one individual), does not include all knowledge. Divine knowledge, as far as man is concerned, is unlimited,” and “There are paradoxes in life: apparent loss may be real gain; apparent cruelty may be real mercy; returning good for evil may really be justice and not generosity (18:79-82). Allah’s wisdom transcends all human calculation.”

Another point emerges in Islamic tradition: don’t kill children, unless you know they’re going to grow up to be unbelievers. “The Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) used not to kill the children, so thou shouldst not kill them unless you could know what Khadir had known about the child he killed, or you could distinguish between a child who would grow up to be a believer (and a child who would grow up to be a non-believer), so that you killed the (prospective) non-believer and left the (prospective) believer aside.” The assumption thus enunciated may help explain the persistence of the phenomenon of honor-killing in Islamic countries and even among Muslims in the West.

In Islamic mystical tradition Khidr looms large. The eighth-century Sufi mystic Ibrahim Bin Adham (Abou Ben Adhem) once claimed: “In that wilderness I lived for four years. God gave me my eating without any toil of mine. Khidr the Green Ancient was my companion during that time — he taught me the Great Name of God.” Some consider Khidr to be immortal (Ibn Taymiyya thinks so). This idea rests on many arguments. Bayhaqi recounts that when Muhammad died, the assembled mourners heard a voice – identified as that of Khidr – exhorting them to trust in Allah. The idea also has a basis in Muhammad’s own words. Once Muhammad was telling his followers about the Dajjal, the anti-Christ figure who plays a large role in Islamic eschatology. The Dajjal, he explained, would kill a person and bring him back to life, and then would try to kill him again but would not be able to do so. “That person would be Khadir.”

In view of his immortality, not a few Muslim (and even some non-Muslim) mystics through the centuries have recounted meetings with him – [here](#) is a tongue-in-cheek, more recent example, as a man runs into Khidr at Home Depot.

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 18, "The Cave," verses 83-110

As we saw two weeks ago, verses 83-101 of sura 18 were revealed after a group of rabbis devised a test for Muhammad's claim to be a prophet: "Ask him about a man who travelled a great deal and reached the east and the west of the earth. What was his story?" That man was Dhul-Qarnayn (v. 83) – "the one with two horns." Ibn Kathir explains that he had "dominion over the east and the west, all countries and their kings submitted to him, and all the nations, Arab and non-Arab, served him." He goes on to explain that Dhul-Qarnayn got his Qur'anic name "because he reached the two 'Horns' of the sun, east and west, where it rises and where it sets."

But who was this great conqueror? The Tafsir al-Jalalayn says that "he was not a prophet" and that his "name was Alexander" – better known as Alexander the Great, who was depicted on coins with two ram's horns on his head. Maududi notes that "early commentators on the Qur'an were generally inclined to believe" that Dhul-Qarnayn was Alexander. Muhammad Al-Ghazali says that Alexander the Great is "high on the list of possibilities."

However, Dhul-Qarnayn seems to have been a pious Muslim, since he said: "Whoever doth wrong, him shall we punish; then shall he be sent back to his Lord; and He will punish him with a punishment unheard-of (before). But whoever believes, and works righteousness, he shall have a goodly reward, and easy will be his task as We order it by our Command" (vv. 87-88). This has led [some modern-day Muslim commentators](#) on the Qur'an to be embarrassed by the earlier commentators' insistence that the manifestly pagan Alexander the Great was identified as a Muslim in the Qur'an. Some have suggested instead that Dhul Qarnayn was Cyrus the Great of Persia, or some other great ancient king, but such identifications lead to many of the same difficulties caused by saying that Dhul Qarnayn was Alexander: Muhammad Asad observes that "it is precisely the Qur'anic stress on his faith in God that makes it impossible to identify Dhu'l-Qarnayn, as most of the commentators do, with Alexander the Great (who is represented on some of his coins with two horns on his head) or with one or another of the pre-Islamic, Himyaritic kings of Yemen. All those historic personages were pagans and worshipped a plurality of deities as a matter of course, whereas our Dhu'l-Qarnayn is depicted as a firm believer in the One God." The consensus today, therefore, is that his exact identification is unknown. Asad concludes that the Qur'anic account "has nothing to do with history or even legend, and that its sole purport is a parabolic discourse on faith and ethics, with specific reference to the problem of worldly power."

Anyway, whoever he was, Dhul-Qarnayn traveled to the farthest West, until "he reached the setting-place of the sun, he found it setting in a muddy spring" (v. 86). [The Iraqi astronomer](#) who insisted last fall that the Qur'an taught that the earth was flat did not quote this verse, and that was probably because it has been understood for centuries in a way that wouldn't have given Copernicus dyspepsia. Ibn Kathir explains that it means that Dhul-Qarnayn "followed a route until he reached the furthest point that could be reached in the direction of the sun's setting, which is the west of the earth." He didn't actually see the sun setting, he was just watching it from the shore: "he saw the sun as if it were setting in the ocean. This is something which everyone who goes to the coast can see: it looks as if the sun is setting into the sea but in fact it never leaves its path in which it is fixed." So where do people get crazy ideas such as that he actually reached "the place in the sky where the sun sets"? Why, from the Jews and Christians, of course: "Most of these stories come from the myths of the People of the Book and the fabrications and lies of their heretics."

After traveling from the farthest West to the farthest East (v. 90), Dhul-Qarnayn on another journey encounters Gog and Magog, who "do great mischief on earth" (v. 94, cf. 5:33). They are, according to Ibn Kathir, "two groups of Turks, descended from Yafith (Japheth), the father of the Turks, one of the sons of Noah." Dhul-Qarnayn walls them in between two mountains (v. 96) – which is another reason why he is identified with Alexander the Great, who according to pre-

Islamic legend built the Gates, or Wall, of Alexander in the Caucasus in order to protect his empire from the barbarians of the northern regions – who were associated with Gog and Magog of Ezekiel 38-39. But the wall will come down (v. 98) on the Day of Judgment, when the trumpet sounds (v. 99). A popular modern-day Saudi preacher, Muhammad Saleh al-Munajjid, [explained Islamic eschatology in a nutshell](#):

Ya'juj and Ma'juj are two disbelieving tribes from among the sons of Adam. They used to spread mischief on earth, so Allah gave Dhul-Qarnayn the power to build a barrier to detain them. They will keep on digging at it until Allah gives them permission to come out at the end of time, after 'Isa [Jesus] (peace be upon him) has killed the Dajjal [”Deceiver”]. They will emerge in huge numbers and will drink up the lake of Tiberias (in Palestine). They will spread mischief on earth and no one will be able to resist them. 'Isa (peace be upon him) and the believers with him will take refuge in Mount Tur until Allah destroys Ya'juj and Ma'juj [Gog and Magog] by sending worms that will eat their necks. Then Allah will send rain to wash away their bodies into the sea and cleanse the earth of their stench.”

When will this be? No one knows, but even in his day Muhammad the prophet of Islam was warning: “Woe unto the Arabs from a danger that has come near. An opening has been made in the wall of Gog and Magog like this” – and he made a circle with his thumb and index finger. Muhammad also warned that only one out a thousand people would be saved: “one-thousand will be from Gog and Magog, and the one (to be saved will be) from you [Muslims].”

Verses 102-110 conclude this wild and wonderful sura by returning to several familiar themes: the unbelievers trust in created beings rather than in Allah, and hell awaits them (v. 102); even the good works of those who deny Islam will be for naught (vv. 104-106); the believers will enjoy the gardens of Paradise (v. 107); Muhammad is just a human being, but what he is transmitting are the words of Allah, who has no partners (v. 110).

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 19, "Mary"

This is another Meccan sura. In the first part of Muhammad's career, a group of Muslims migrated from Arabia to Abyssinia. One of the Muslims recited the material here about Mary and Jesus to the Christian ruler of Abyssinia, showing him that Muslims believed in Jesus, but not as the Son of God.

After the mysterious letters in v. 1, verses 2-40 retell the story told in Luke 1:5-80 – with some important differences, of course. Vv. 2-15 begin, as does Luke's account, with the story of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, encountering an angel (Luke 1:11; v. 9 of this chapter of the Qur'an establishes that Allah is not speaking directly with Zechariah). The angel tells him he will become a father despite his old age and his wife's barrenness (v. 8). In the Qur'an, unlike in the Gospel, this comes as an answer to his prayer for a son (vv. 4-6). In both the Gospel (Luke 1:20) and the Qur'an (v. 10) he is unable to speak after this vision, although the Qur'an, unlike the Gospel, does not present this as punishment for his unbelief, but only as a sign of Allah's power.

There is nothing in the Qur'an paralleling the Gospel's connection of Zechariah's son John with Elijah (Luke 1:17), the prophet who was to return before the Lord's coming (Malachi 4:5-6). John is not the messenger sent to prepare the way of the Lord; he is simply pious ("meaning that he was pure and had no inclination to do sins," says Ibn Kathir, in an echo of some Christian traditions that John committed no sins), devout, and kind to his parents (vv. 13-14).

Then vv. 15-40 follows the story of the birth of Jesus, but like the account of the birth of John it differs significantly from the Gospel account. For one thing, the angel tells her only that she will be the mother of a "holy son" (v. 19) – there is not a word, of course, about his being "Son of the Most High" (Luke 1:32), a concept rejected again in v. 35. Jesus is virginally conceived (v. 20). Ibn Kathir says that many scholars believe she conceived by the breath of the angel Gabriel: "Many scholars of the predecessors (Salaf) have mentioned that at this point the angel (who was Jibril [Gabriel]) blew into the opening of the garment that she was wearing. Then the breath descended until it entered into her vagina and she conceived the child by the leave of Allah."

Mary still suffers the pains of childbirth (v. 23) – while in some Christian traditions she does not, since those are the result of the sin (Genesis 3:16) that Jesus is taking upon himself and expiating (I Corinthians 15:22). Here, Mary gives birth to Jesus under a palm tree (not in a manger as in Luke 2:7) as Allah comforts her in her pains with dates (vv. 24-26). A voice cries out from beneath her, "Grieve not! For thy Lord hath provided a rivulet beneath thee" (v. 24); Ibn Abbas, Sa'id bin Jubayr, Ad-Dahhak, 'Amr bin Maymun, As-Suddi and Qatadah say this was Gabriel, while Mujahid, Al-Hasan, and Abdul-Rahman bin Zayd say it was the baby Jesus, who speaks soon enough anyway (vv. 30-33).

Abdul-Rahman bin Zayd notes that when Jesus told her in this verse not to grieve, she responded, "How can I not grieve when you are with me and I have no husband nor am I an owned slave woman?" To avoid the embarrassment of having to explain how she came to have a newborn, he tells her to tell people she is fasting and not speaking with anyone (v. 26). And as expected, when her family sees the child, they are amazed (v. 27), and remonstrate with her: "O sister of Aaron! Thy father was not a man of evil, nor thy mother a woman unchaste!" Many have charged that since the Qur'an here calls Mary "sister of Aaron," Muhammad is confusing Mary the mother of Jesus with Miriam the sister of Moses and Aaron – in Arabic the names are identical, Maryam. Even the Christians of Muhammad's day noticed this, but Muhammad had a ready explanation: "The (people of the old age) used to give names (to their persons) after the names of Apostles and pious persons who had gone before them." So calling Mary "sister of Aaron" was, says Muhammad, an honor, not an error.

In any case, to allay their suspicions Mary simply points to the cradle, and Jesus begins speaking (vv. 30-33). This and other Qur'anic material about Jesus seems to come from heretical and non-canonical Christian material: the baby Jesus doesn't speak in the New Testament, but an Arabic Infancy Gospel that dates from the sixth century says this: "Jesus spoke, and, indeed, when He was lying in His cradle said to Mary His mother: I am Jesus, the Son of God, the Logos, whom thou hast brought forth, as the Angel Gabriel announced to thee; and my Father has sent me for the salvation of the world." Of course, in the Qur'an he doesn't say he was the Son of God, but rather the "slave of Allah" (v. 30), for to have a son is not befitting for Allah's majesty (v. 35).

Verses 41-50 return to the story of Abraham, recounting his breach with his father when his father refused to give up his idol-worship. Abraham prays that Allah will forgive his father (v. 47), but we learn elsewhere that in this he is not an example for the Muslims (60:4). Abraham turns away not only from the idols, but from his father also (vv. 48, 50). Verses 51-58 mention in passing several prophets, including Moses, Ishmael, and Idris (Enoch). Verses 59-63 return to the delights that the blessed will enjoy in Paradise, but without being very specific.

Then verses 64-98 conclude the sura by sounding familiar themes, mostly about the unbelievers. The angels don't descend except by Allah's command (v. 64) – this said because Muhammad wondered why he didn't see Gabriel more often. Those who doubt the resurrection will not escape the Day of Judgment (vv. 66-71). In v. 73, the unbelievers are ready to determine which religion to follow based on the level of earthly prosperity of its adherents. "In this," according to Ibn Kathir, "they were saying, 'How can we be upon falsehood while we are in this manner of successful living?'" But Allah has destroyed countless generations before them (v. 74). Those who boast of their worldly success while remaining unbelievers will be punished for their boasts (vv. 77-80). The demons that the unbelievers worship will turn against them (v. 82); indeed, Allah will set the demons upon them (v. 83). The idea that Allah has begotten a Son is "most monstrous" (v. 89) – indeed, "at it the skies are ready to burst, the earth to split asunder, and the mountains to fall down in utter ruin" (v. 90). Allah will judge all beings (v. 95). The Qur'an gives "Glad Tidings to the righteous, and warnings to people given to contention" (v. 97) – for "how many a generation before them have We destroyed!" (v. 98)

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 20, "Ta Ha"

If I ever get world enough and time, I will check in on my counterpart Ziauddin Sardar's Blogging the Qur'an series at the Guardian, and start Blogging Blogging the Qur'an. It will be extremely illuminating, I believe, to compare our two treatments of the same material. If anyone has read his entries and has any observations, please note them here. In the meantime, I'm keeping up my own series, primarily exploring how mainstream Muslim commentators have understood the Qur'anic text.

This early Meccan sura "has no rival," says Muhammad Al-Ghazali, "in its uncompromising affirmation of the Absolute Unity of Allah." It takes its name from the two Arabic letters that begin it, ta (ط) and ha (ه). Ibn Abbas and other early commentators have suggested that ta ha (طه) is actually a phrase from an ancient Arabic dialect, meaning "O man," in which case it may be that here Allah is addressing Muhammad, as he does in v. 2 — where once again consoles his downcast prophet, telling him he is not being given the Qur'an in order to distress him. Everything belongs to Allah (v. 6) and he knows all secrets (v. 7), for he has the best names — that is, the highest attributes (v. 8).

Then verses 9-99 tell yet again the story of Moses, which has already been touched on in suras 2, 7, 10, and 17. But, as Al-Ghazali observes, "every time the story appears different aspects of it emerge. Each version has details which are not included in any other version." But the repeated aspects have their usefulness as well. Al-Ghazali also points out that this sura is very concerned with reminding and bidding the faithful to remember truths that they have already learned: the Qur'an itself is a reminder (v. 3); the believers should pray regularly so as to remember Allah (v. 14); Moses asks Allah to be given Aaron as a helper, so that together the brothers can praise and remember him without ceasing (vv. 29-34); Allah grants this, and warns Moses not to grow slack in remembering him (v. 42); Allah instructs Moses to go speak to Pharaoh so that perhaps Pharaoh will remember or show some fear of Allah (v. 44); Allah never forgets (v. 52), but after the mysterious Samiri fashions the idol of the calf, he tells the people that this is their god, but that Moses has forgotten that (v. 88); Allah tells Muhammad that he told him the whole story of Moses again as a reminder (v. 99); Allah gave the world the Qur'an so as to bring some people to remember him (v. 113); Adam forgot his covenant with Allah (v. 115); Allah will forget on the Day of Judgment those who forgot his signs (ayat, or verses of the Qur'an) in this world (v. 126).

Sufis say that when Moses approached the Burning Bush and heard the voice of Allah (vv. 10-17), he attained the states of fana, or absorption of the self into the deity, and baqaa, life in union with Allah. His shoes, they say, represented his separation from Allah, which is why Allah tells him to take them off (v. 12). According to Ibn Masud Baghavi in Ma'alimut-tanzil, what Moses saw wasn't actually fire at all, but the heavenly light (Nur) of Allah.

Anyway, Allah equips Moses with the staff that turns into a snake (v. 20) and a hand that would turn brilliant white "without disease" (v. 22), and sends him off to confront Pharaoh. Allah grants Moses' request to take Aaron along (v. 36) and tells him the story of how he was plucked out of the river by "one who is an enemy to Me and an enemy to him" (v. 39) as a baby and returned to his mother (v. 40). The story is told as if the hearers are already familiar with the outline of the story of Moses from the Book of Exodus.

When Allah tells Moses and Aaron again to go to Pharaoh (v. 44), they respond that they're afraid "lest he hasten with insolence against us, or lest he transgress all bounds" (v. 46). Allah responds that they should not be afraid, for he is with them, and sees and hears everything — recalling the message of consolation he gave to Muhammad in vv. 5-7. So Moses and Aaron do their duty, telling

Pharaoh that Allah is the only God and has “made for you the earth like a carpet spread out” (v. 53), and that punishment awaits the disbelievers (v. 48). But Pharaoh rejects their message (v. 56) and says he can match their miracles (v. 58). When his magicians, however, profess their faith in Allah (v. 70), Pharaoh threatens them in language that eerily foreshadows Allah’s own recommended punishment (revealed later) for those who make war against Allah and Muhammad (5:33): he tells them he’ll crucify them, or amputate a hand and a foot on opposite sides (v. 71). Evidently the punishments are fine – the only problem is the person administering them, and for what reason.

Allah saves the Israelites from Pharaoh by parting the sea so that they pass on dry land (vv. 77-79). Moses ascends the mountain to meet Allah, but doesn’t receive the Ten Commandments. Instead, Allah asks him why he hurried up the mountain in advance of his people (v. 82) and tells him that he is testing Moses’ people by allowing Samiri to lead them astray (v. 85). Moses scolds Aaron for doing nothing when he saw them beginning to go astray (v. 92). Samiri explains that he took “a handful (of dust) from the footprint of the Messenger” to fashion the calf (v. 96). Muslim commentators generally agree that he took this dust from one of the hoofprints left by the angel Gabriel’s horse, as Gabriel led the Israelites in battle. Moses punishes Samiri, telling him “thy punishment in this life will be that thou wilt say, ‘touch me not’ (v. 97). Ibn Kathir explains: “This means, ‘Just as you took and touched what was not your right to take and touch of the messenger’s foot print, such is your punishment in this life, that you will say, ‘Do not touch (me).’ This means, ‘You will not touch the people and they will not touch you.’” This may be a hint that Samiri is a Samaritan – a people who generally did not (and do not) intermingle with outsiders.

Verses 100-112 warn about the dreadful Day of Judgment. Then verses 113-123 tell us that Allah has sent down an “Arabic Qur’an” so that people may fear him (v. 113) – this is one of the verses that establishes the proposition that the Qur’an is essentially in Arabic and cannot be translated. Allah tells Muhammad “be not in haste with the Qur’an before its revelation to thee is completed” (v. 114). This is because, says Ibn Abbas, Muhammad would recite revelations rapidly as they were being revealed, trying to remember them. He should trust in Allah’s power to make him remember. After that the Qur’an returns to the story of Adam’s fall; Satan tempts Adam to eat from the Tree of Eternity (v. 120) – not the tree of the knowledge of good and evil as in Genesis. Allah expels Adam and Eve from the Garden but tells them that those who follow his guidance will not lose their way (v. 123).

Verses 124-135 conclude the sura with more warnings: the disbelievers will be raised up blind on Judgment Day (v. 125); Muhammad should be patient with the unbelievers (v. 130), because their punishment is coming (v. 129); nor should Muhammad envy their worldly goods (v. 131); the unbelievers ask for a sign, but they have ignored all of Allah’s previous revelations (v. 133).

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 21, "The Prophets"

After several suras have recounted the message and reception of various prophets in strikingly similar terms, this sura, "The Prophets," discusses the phenomenon of prophecy and the way it is received in general (usually with scoffing). It also touches on several prophets specifically, including Abraham, David, Solomon, Job, and Zechariah. Sura 21 is a late Meccan sura, and was revealed against the backdrop of the ongoing strife between Muhammad and the leaders of the pagan Quraysh tribe of Mecca – a tribe of which Muhammad was a member, but which had rejected his prophetic claim. This sura is full of both direct and implied references to their skepticism, as well as replies to their objections.

Verses 1-47 speak generally of how the unbelievers always scorn the signs of Allah's creative power, and the messages of the prophets. We hear their dismissals of Muhammad's prophetic pretensions, and in vv. 4, 24, 42 and 45 Allah tells Muhammad what to say to them. The unbelievers claim that Muhammad is bringing witchcraft, and assume that to be a prophet he would have to be "more than a man like yourselves" (v. 3). But the earlier prophets were just ordinary men, as the unbelievers can discover by asking the Jews and Christians ("those who possess the Message") (vv. 7-8). The unbelievers say that Muhammad is a poet who has invented the Qur'an, and that if he were really a prophet he would work a miracle (v. 5). But Allah has destroyed entire populations in the past (v. 6) and has done what he promised to do, and saved "those whom We pleased, but We destroyed those who transgressed beyond bounds" (v. 9).

Now Allah has revealed a book with a message for mankind – that is, the Qur'an (v. 10). And this is no game: Allah didn't create everything just to play (v. 16). If he had wanted to do find a pastime, he "could have found it in Our presence" (v. 17). That is, according to the Tafsir al-Jalalayn, "Had We desired to find some diversion, that which provides diversion, in the way of a partner or a child, We would have found it with Ourselves, from among the beautiful-eyed houris or angels..." The "beautiful-eyed houris" are the fabled virgins of Paradise.

But instead, in a jarringly violent image, "We hurl the Truth against falsehood, and it knocks out its brain, and behold, falsehood doth perish!" (v. 18). Even the beings that stand in Allah's presence aren't too proud to serve him (vv. 19-20). The unbelievers can't be right that their objects of worship are really gods besides Allah, because this multiplicity would create confusion not only in heaven, but also on earth (v. 22) – a verse that may reveal why Islamic societies have always tended toward authoritarianism and never been hospitable to democracy. Allah, meanwhile, the absolute ruler, "cannot be questioned for His acts" (v. 23). Says Ibn Kathir: "He is the Ruler Whose rule cannot be overturned and none can object to it, because of His might, majesty, pride, knowledge, wisdom, justice and subtlety." Those who say "Allah has begotten offspring" (v. 26) are not just the Christians, but the pagan Arabs who worshipped the daughters of Allah – whom we shall hear more about later, notably in sura 53. Allah's servants – that is, the prophets — intercede only for those who are acceptable to him (v. 28), and if any of those servants claimed to be a god, he would be go to hell (v. 29).

Haven't the unbelievers realized the signs of Allah's creating hand in the things of this earth (vv. 30-33)? Yet they dare to ridicule Muhammad (v. 36), heedless of the fact that the Day of Judgment will inevitably come (vv. 37-44). Everyone will be dealt with justly on that Day, and his smallest good deed, even the size of a mustard seed, will not go unnoticed (v. 47).

Then verses 48-93 cite some of the significant events in the lives of some of the prophets, again with numerous parallels to Muhammad's own situation with the Quraysh. Allah gave Moses and Aaron the criterion (al-furqan, الْفُرْقَان) (v. 48) – that is, the true guidance. Al-furqan is in Islamic

tradition identified with the Qur'an itself, but here it applies to the earlier prophetic message – the Torah that was delivered to Moses. In Islamic tradition both the Torah and the Gospel were identical in substance with the Qur'an before they were corrupted by the perverse and unbelieving followers of Moses and Jesus.

Vv. 51-73 return to the story of Abraham, once again recounting his refusal to worship his father's idols. He confronts the idolaters of his own people, who scoff at him in just the way that the Quraysh have scoffed at Muhammad. They even go so far as to try to burn him to death, but Allah makes the fire cool and saves his prophet (vv. 68-69). Then follow in quick succession brief references to Lot (vv. 74-75); Noah (vv. 76-77); David and Solomon (vv. 78-82); Job (vv. 83-84); Ishmael, Idris (Enoch), and Dhul-Kifl (Ezekiel) (v. 85); Dhu'n-Nun (Jonah) (vv. 87-88); Zechariah (vv. 89-90); and Mary and Jesus (v. 91), all of whom, we are reminded here, remained faithful to Allah through various kinds of difficulty and distress (and, often, scorn from unbelievers). All shared a single religion, Islam (v. 92), although those who followed after these prophets "have broken their religion (into fragments)" (v. 93). The original religion of all the prophets was Islam, and when someone claims to follow one of those prophets – Abraham, Moses, Jesus – but rejects Islam, he is rejecting the true message of those prophets in favor of a later corrupted version.

Verses 94-112 warn of the Judgment Day. When Gog and Magog are let loose (see sura 18:94), then the unbelievers will realize that all this was true (v. 97). As they enter hell they will see that their false gods are useless to keep them out of it (vv. 98-100). But the believers will not suffer any of this, or even hear the damned screaming in hell; instead, the angels will greet them (vv. 101-103). Allah will produce a new creation in the same way that he produced the first one (v. 104). The righteous – i.e., the Muslims – will inherit the earth (v. 105). The Qur'an is a message for those who want to worship Allah (v. 106), and Muhammad is sent "as a mercy for all creatures" (v. 107). Muhammad should tell the people that he has delivered the warning he was commanded to deliver, but he doesn't know when the promised Judgment will come (v. 109).

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 22, "The Pilgrimage"

Islamic scholars are divided over whether this sura dates from the Meccan or Medinan period of Muhammad's prophetic career. Ibn Kathir and Maulana Muhammad Ali say it's Meccan, while the Tafsir Anwar ul-Bayan, Daryabadi and others say it's Medinan. Maududi splits the difference by noting a stylistic change between verses 1-24 and verses 25-78, and postulating that the first part comes from Mecca and the second from Medina.

Verses 1-24 are another warning about the dreadful Day of Judgment (vv. 1-2, 4, 7) and excoriation of the perversity of the unbelievers (vv. 3, 5-6, 8-13). The righteous will be admitted to luxuriant Gardens (vv. 14, 23-24). Those who doubt that Allah will help Muhammad in this world and the next should hang themselves (v. 15). "This," says Ibn Kathir, "was also the view of Mujahid, 'Ikrimah, 'Ata, Abu Al-Jawza, Qatadah and others. The meaning is: whoever thinks that Allah will not support Muhammad and His Book and His Religion, let him go and kill himself if it annoys him so much." Allah has sent down clear signs – a reference to the verses (ayat, or signs) of the Qur'an – and guides to the truth those whom he wills to guide (v. 16). Jews, Christians, and others will all be judged (v. 17); "Allah will decide on the Day of Judgement between them," says Maulana Bulandshahri in the Tafsir Anwar ul-Bayan, "and disclose to them that only the Muslims were guided aright."

Even the sun, moon, stars, and all created beings worship Allah (v. 18). In fact, Muhammad was once asked where the sun went when it set. He replied: "It goes (i.e. travels) till it prostrates itself underneath the Throne and takes the permission to rise again, and it is permitted...."

How dreadful will the Judgment and hellfire be? Allah luridly describes the horrors of hell – scalding water, iron whips (vv. 19-22). According to a hadith, Muhammad says that 999 out of every thousand people will be sent to hell. On that Day, Adam will ask Allah: "O Allah! How many are the people of the Fire?" Allah will answer: "From every one thousand, take out nine-hundred-and ninety-nine." Muhammad explained that that one person saved would be a Muslim, telling his companions: "Rejoice with glad tidings; one person will be from you and one-thousand will be from Gog and Magog."

Maududi suggests that verses 25-78 were revealed not long after the Muslims migrated from Mecca to Medina, and around the time of the Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, were feeling particularly homesick. The pagan Quraysh controlled Mecca at that time, and had barred the Muslims from making the pilgrimage. "Therefore, they might even have been praying for and expecting Divine permission to wage war against those tyrants who had expelled them from their homes and deprived them of visiting the House of Allah and made it difficult for them to follow the way of Islam. It was at this psychological occasion that these verses were sent down."

Those who are keeping the Muslims from making the pilgrimage will suffer a grievous punishment (v. 25). Allah directed Abraham to the site for the Sacred Mosque in Mecca and told him that it would be a place of pilgrimage for those who believe in Allah and do not associate partners with him (vv. 26-31). All people should perform sacrificial rites, sacrificing animals to Allah (vv. 32-38). Those who have been expelled from their homes and victimized in other ways have permission to fight against those who have wronged them (vv. 39-40). According to Mujahid, Ad-Dahhak, Ibn 'Abbas, 'Urwah bin Az-Zubayr, Zayd bin Aslam, Muqatil bin Hayan, Qatadah and others, this was the first verse revealed about jihad – that is, says Maududi: "v. 39 is the first verse that grants the Muslims permission to wage war." This verse is also the epigraph of Osama bin Laden's October 6, 2002 letter to the American people, in which he details his motives and goals.

The Muslims, "if We establish them in the land, establish regular prayer and give regular charity,

enjoin the right and forbid wrong” (v. 41) – that is, they establish the proper ordering of society. But those who reject the message of the Muslims will ultimately be destroyed, as were the disbelievers of bygone ages (vv. 42-48). Allah tells Muhammad how to address the unbelievers, telling them that he is just giving them a warning: follow the way of righteousness or face hellfire (vv. 49-51).

Satan has interfered with the messages of all previous prophets, but Allah abrogates whatever falsehood he throws in (vv. 52-53). Ibn Kathir says at that this point many commentators of the Qur’an discuss the Satanic Verses incident, in which Muhammad, hoping to reconcile with the pagan Quraysh tribe of Mecca (of which he was a member and who had rejected his prophethood) was said to have declared three goddesses worshipped by the Quraysh as the “daughters of Allah.” Then, realizing he had compromised his message of monotheism, he retracted the verses in question, saying that in that instance he had been inspired by Satan. Ibn Kathir, however, doesn’t believe that any of the accounts of the incident are reliable. We will return to this when we come around to sura 53, in which the beginning part of Muhammad’s revelation about the goddesses still appears, although of course the “Satanic” elements are not there.

Allah guides believers to the straight path of Islam (v. 54), while those without faith will never accept Islam, until finally judgment comes upon them (vv. 55, 57). Those who are killed in jihad warfare will be rewarded (v. 59). Those who have retaliated only in proportion to the injury they suffered, and then are attacked again, will receive help from Allah (v. 60). Ibn Kathir explains: “Muqatil bin Hayan and Ibn Jurayj mentioned that this was revealed about a skirmish in which the Companions encountered some of the idolaters. The Muslims urged them not to fight during the Sacred Months, but the idolaters insisted on fighting and initiated the aggression. So the Muslims fought them and Allah granted them victory.”

Allah has power over all things, and all things bear witness to his presence and power (vv. 61-66). Muhammad is to call all people to Islam, without arguing with them (vv. 67-69). Allah knows everything (v. 70), and yet they persist in their perversity and idolatry (vv. 71-72). The idols of the unbelievers can’t even create a fly (v. 73). The believers should worship Allah (v. 77) and fight for his cause, which is the religion of Abraham. Allah has called the believers Muslims both before this revelation and now in it also. The believers’ job is to be witnesses to Allah before all mankind (v. 78).

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 23, "The Believers"

This sura comes from the middle of Muhammad's Meccan period, during the time of a famine in Mecca, which is referred to obliquely in vv. 75-6. Umar, the second caliph of the Muslims after Muhammad, reported: "This Surah was revealed in my presence and I myself observed the state of the Holy Prophet during its revelation. When the revelation ended, the Holy Prophet remarked, 'On this occasion ten such verses have been sent down to me that the one who measures up to them, will most surely go to Paradise.' Then he recited the initial verses of the surah."

Those Paradise-enabling verses (verses 1-11) promise success to the believers (v. 1) – recalling the muezzin's call to prayer from the minaret, which says in part: "Come to prayer, come to success." Allah enumerates the characteristics of those who will go to Paradise: they pray humbly (v. 2) and faithfully (v. 9); they shun vain talk (v. 3); they're charitable to the poor (v. 4); they keep their word and their covenants (v. 8); and they're chaste (v. 5) – except with their wives and slave girls (v. 6). The Tafsir al-Jalalayn explains: "except from their spouses, that is, to their spouses, and what [slaves] their right hands possess, that is, concubines, for then they are not blameworthy, in having sexual intercourse with them." Maududi asserts that "the fact that the people who have accepted the Message of the Holy Prophet have started acquiring such and such noble qualities of character is a practical proof of the truth of the Message."

Then verses 12-22 point to various elements of the natural world as proof of Allah's power: the creation and growth of human beings from "a product of wet earth" (vv. 12-14); and various features of the natural world: the rain, trees, cattle, etc. (vv. 17-22). According to a hadith recorded in the Mishkat al-Masabih, Muhammad offers a determinist view of why some people are good and others evil. It's all because of the type of sand they were made from: "Allah took a handful of sand from all over the earth and mixed it with water so that it became mud. Allah then cast the mould of Sayyidina [Master] Adam from this mud. Allah then blew the soul into it. The progeny of Sayyidina Adam will therefore be like the portion of sand they were created from. Among them are reddish people, white people, black people and others between these complexions. Some of them are soft, others hard, some good, others bad (according to the type of sand)."

Verses 23-52 return to the stories of various prophets: Noah (vv. 23-30); an unnamed prophet in the generation after Noah (vv. 31-41); other unnamed prophets sent to other people (vv. 42-44); Moses and Aaron (vv. 45-49); and Jesus (v. 50). As we have seen elsewhere in the Qur'an, these accounts frequently recall Muhammad's own experience with those who rejected his message. Muhammad thereby puts his opponents on notice that they are doing the same thing that the enemies of the prophets of old did, and that they will face the same divine judgment. Noah's enemies scoff that he is just "a man like yourselves" (v. 24), and the critics of unnamed prophet say the same thing (v. 33). And of course, Muhammad is just an ordinary man (18:110). They say Noah is possessed (v. 25) – and that's the same thing they say about Muhammad (44:14). The unbelievers deny that the dead will be raised (v. 37), just as they did to Muhammad (19:66).

Another message here is that Muhammad's message is the same as that of the earlier prophets, and "this Brotherhood of yours is a single Brotherhood" – that is, the Brotherhood of the Prophets (v. 52).

More warnings to the unbelievers come in verses 53-90. Those who enjoy prosperity in this life (vv. 55-56) will not escape the judgment. Those who believe in "the signs of their Lord" – that is, the verses of the Qur'an (v. 58) and do not associate partners with Allah (v. 59) will be saved. Allah gives no soul a burden greater than it can bear (v. 62). The unbelievers will "groan in supplication" on the Day of Judgment (v. 64), but Allah will not help them (v. 65), because when the verses ("signs") of the Qur'an were recited, they would turn their backs (v. 66) and scorn the Qur'an itself

(v. 67). The message that has come to them from Allah is the same as the one sent to their fathers of old (v. 68). They accuse Muhammad of being possessed (v. 69), just as Noah's enemies said of him (v. 25), but actually Muhammad has simply brought them the truth – but most of them hate the truth. Muhammad is calling them to the straight path (v. 73), which is Islam, but even if Allah removed from the unbelievers the present distress they are suffering (because of the famine in Mecca), they would not believe (vv. 75-76). The unbelievers doubt that the dead will be raised for judgment (vv. 82-83), but everything belongs to Allah and will return to him (vv. 84-89).

Verses 91-118 conclude this sura with further warnings to the unbelievers. Allah has not begotten a son, and if he had, each god would have fought with the others on behalf of what he himself had created (v. 91). Ibn Kathir explains: "If it were decreed that there should be a plurality of deities, each of them would have exclusive control over whatever he had created, so there would never be any order in the universe. But what we see is that the universe is ordered and cohesive, with the upper and lower realms connected to one another in the most perfect fashion." Interestingly enough, the idea of cooperation among the members of a group doesn't seem to come up.

Allah tells Muhammad to seek refuge with him against the unbelievers (vv. 93-100). On Judgment Day the scoffers will have no one to help them (v. 101). Those whose good deeds outweigh their evil deeds will be saved (v. 102), but those whose evil deeds are heavier will go to hell (v. 103), where they will grin horribly after their lips are burnt off (v. 104), as the Tafsir al-Jalalayn says: "The Fire will scorch their faces, it will burn them, while they glower therein, their upper and lower lips having receded from their teeth." Allah will then ask them "Were not My Signs [ayat, verses of the Qur'an] rehearsed to you, and ye did but treat them as falsehood?" (v. 105), and the damned will make excuses (v. 106) and plead for another chance (v. 107), which Allah will not grant (v. 108), because they used to ridicule his servants (vv. 108-109). Life is short (v. 113), and Allah will ask the unbelievers, ""Did ye then think that We had created you in jest, and that ye would not be brought back to Us (for account)?" (v. 115).

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 24, "The Light," verses 1-20

This Medinan sura was revealed after the Muslims' defeat of a pagan Arab tribe, the Banu al-Mustaliq. Much of it is preoccupied with one of the most notorious events in early Islamic history: the rumors that Muhammad's favorite wife, Aisha, had committed adultery – an incident that has repercussions for Muslim women down to this day. Verses 1-10 lay down general laws for adultery: adulterers are to receive a hundred lashes (v. 2); a man guilty of adultery may only marry a woman guilty of the same crime or a non-Muslim (v. 3); four witnesses are required to establish guilt, and false accusers should get eighty lashes (v. 4); husbands can establish charges of adultery against their wives if they testify four times under oath (v. 6) and invoke Allah's curse on themselves if they're lying (v. 7); a wife so accused can head off being punished by testifying four times that her husband is lying (v. 8) and likewise calls Allah's curse on herself if she is lying (v. 9).

Lashes for adultery? Then why do some Islamic states sentence adulteresses to be [stoned](#) to [death](#)? Because of a hadith that says that the Qur'an originally mandated stoning for adulterers, but the passage somehow dropped out. Umar, the second successor of Muhammad as caliph, the leader of the believers, explained: "I am afraid that after a long time has passed, people may say, 'We do not find the Verses of the Rajam (stoning to death) in the Holy Book,' and consequently they may go astray by leaving an obligation that Allah has revealed."

Umar didn't want to see that happening, so he lent his own weight to the legitimacy of stoning for adultery: "Lo! I confirm that the penalty of Rajam be inflicted on him who commits illegal sexual intercourse, if he is already married and the crime is proved by witnesses or pregnancy or confession." Umar added, "Surely Allah's Apostle [that is, Muhammad] carried out the penalty of Rajam, and so did we after him."

In verses 11-20 Allah furiously castigates a group that has "brought forward a lie" (v. 11) against a chaste woman, without producing four witnesses (v. 13). The deity scolds the believers as well, for crediting this obvious slander (vv. 12, 16). This is a most serious matter (v. 15), but the Qur'an doesn't tell us what it's all about. This hadith fills in the details. Allah had recently ordered the veiling of women (a command that is transmitted in v. 31), so Aisha, when she accompanied Muhammad to a battle, was carried in a curtained howdah on the back of a camel. The caravan stopped and Aisha got out to answer "the call of nature." While returning she lost her necklace, and stopped to search for it. Meanwhile, her attendants, forbidden to look at her or speak to her, loaded the howdah back onto the camel without realizing that she wasn't in it. "At that time," Aisha explains, "I was still a young lady," and what's more, "women were light in weight for they did not get fat."

And so the caravan left without her, and Muhammad's favorite wife was stranded. Presently a Muslim warrior who was traveling behind the army came along, and was considerably startled to find Aisha alone. "I veiled my face with my head cover at once," Aisha insisted, "and by Allah, we did not speak a single word, and I did not hear him saying any word besides his *Istirja*" – a prayer spoken in times of distress. The warrior carried Aisha on his camel to the Muslims' camp – and almost immediately the rumors started. Even Muhammad was affected by them. Aisha explains: "After we returned to Medina, I became ill for a month. The people were propagating the forged statements of the slanderers while I was unaware of anything of all that, but I felt that in my present ailment, I was not receiving the usual kindness from Allah's Messenger which I used to receive when I got sick."

Aisha was deeply distressed: "I kept on weeping that night till dawn, I could neither stop weeping nor sleep, then in the morning again, I kept on weeping." Ali bin Abi Talib, who later became the great saint and hero of the Shi'ite Muslims, ungallantly reminds Muhammad that there are "plenty

of women” available to the Prophet (Aisha never forgot or forgave this, and after Muhammad’s death, warred against Ali herself.) But Ali also advises Muhammad to ask Barira, Aisha’s slave girl, if she has seen anything, and Barira maintained that Aisha had done nothing wrong. Muhammad left the matter in Allah’s hands, telling Aisha: “I have been informed such-and-such about you; if you are innocent, then soon Allah will reveal your innocence, and if you have committed a sin, then repent to Allah and ask Him for forgiveness, for when a person confesses his sins and asks Allah for forgiveness, Allah accepts his repentance.”

Muhammad then received a revelation from Allah, as Aisha watched: “So there overtook him the same hard condition which used to overtake him (when he was Divinely Inspired) so that the drops of his sweat were running down, like pearls, though it was a (cold) winter day, and that was because of the heaviness of the Statement which was revealed to him. When that state of Allah’s Apostle was over, and he was smiling when he was relieved, the first word he said was, ‘Aisha, Allah has declared your innocence.’” Allah had revealed vv. 11-20.

Aisha, however, was still angry: “My mother said to me, ‘Get up and go to him.’ I said, ‘By Allah, I will not go to him and I will not thank anybody but Allah.’” Yet she was amazed by the revelation: “By Allah, I never thought that Allah would reveal in my favor a revelation which would be recited, for I considered myself too unimportant to be talked about by Allah in the Divine Revelation that was to be recited.”

But she was. And the false accusations against her brought about the requirement that four male Muslim witnesses must be produced in order to establish a crime of adultery or related indiscretions. Islamic law still requires the testimony of four male witnesses to establish sexual crimes (v. 13).

Consequently, it is even today virtually impossible to prove rape in lands that follow the dictates of the Sharia. Even worse, if a woman accuses a man of rape, she may end up incriminating herself. If the required male witnesses can’t be found, the victim’s charge of rape becomes an admission of adultery. That accounts for the grim fact that as many as [seventy-five percent of the women in prison in Pakistan are, in fact, behind bars for the crime of being a victim of rape](#). When the Musharraf government instituted measures removing the crime of rape from the sphere of Islamic law and establishing that it be judged by modern canons of forensic evidence, a group of Islamic clerics were furious. They demanded that the new law be withdrawn: it would turn Pakistan into a “free-sex zone.” [Clerics thundered](#) that the new law was “against the teachings of Islam,” and had been passed only to appease the West.

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 24, "The Light," verses 21-64

That imperialist headline is Qur'an 24:55, discussed below.

Verses 21-26 of sura 24 warn the believers not to imitate Satan (v. 21) by committing sins – such as the sin of not aiding those who have left their homes “in Allah’s cause” (v. 22). This refers to the early Muslims who left Mecca and settled in Medina with Muhammad – it is a call to the new Muslims of Medina to ease their transition. Another sin to avoid is that around which this entire sura revolves: the sin of accusing chaste women of adultery, which will get the false accuser Allah’s curse in both this world and the next (v. 23). Allah will pay them back on the Day of Judgment (v. 25).

All this refers, of course, to the accusation of adultery made against Muhammad’s wife Aisha — as does the phrase “Evil women are for evil men and evil men are for evil women, and good women are for good men and good men are for good women” from v. 26, which Abdur-Rahman bin Zayd bin Aslam explains thusly: “Allah would not have made ‘A’ishah the wife of His Messenger unless she had been good, because he is the best of the best of mankind. If she had been evil, she would not have been a suitable partner either according to His Laws or His decree.”

Verses 27-29 lay down rules for the etiquette of visiting someone else’s house: don’t just barge in. This leads in verses 30-31 to rules for modesty. Men should “lower their gaze” (v. 30): says Ibn Kathir, “They should look only at what is permissible for them to look at, and lower their gaze from forbidden things. If it so happens that a person’s gaze unintentionally falls upon something forbidden, he should quickly look away.”

Women, meanwhile, should cover their “adornment” (v. 31). Contrary to what some Islamic apologists in the West claim today, this is not a matter of choice, but a divine commandment. Ibn Kathir explains: “This is a command from Allah to the believing women, and jealousy on His part over the wives of His believing servants. It is also to distinguish the believing women from the women of the Jahiliyyah [the society of unbelievers] and the deeds of the pagan women.”

What should they cover? In a hadith, Aisha recounts that Muhammad said that “when a woman reaches the age of menstruation, it does not suit her that she displays her parts of body except this and this, and he pointed to her face and hands.” Even today some Muslims use this hadith to justify mandating the hijab, or headscarf, for women. In another hadith, a woman with a veil over her face came to see Muhammad; she was looking for her son, who had been killed in battle. Muhammad asked her: “You have come here asking for your son while veiling your face?” She responded: “If I am afflicted with the loss of my son, I shall not suffer the loss of my modesty.” Pleased, Muhammad told her: “You will get the reward of two martyrs for your son,” because “the people of the Book have killed him.” The Tafsir al-Jalalayn agrees that v. 31 means that when in public women should cover “all that is other than the face and the hands.”

V. 31 also says: “And let them not stamp their feet so as to reveal what they hide of their adornment.” Ibn Kathir continues: “During Jahiliyyah, when women walked in the street wearing anklets and no one could hear them, they would stamp their feet so that men could hear their anklets ringing. Allah forbade the believing women to do this.” And: “women are also prohibited from wearing scent and perfume when they are going outside the home, lest men should smell their perfume.”

Verses 32-34 contain laws for marriage and direct Muslims to free their slaves upon their request (v. 33), “provided,” says Ibn Kathir, “that the servant has some skill and means of earning so that he can pay his master the money that is stipulated in the contract.” Muslims should not force their

slave girls to become prostitutes and live off the profits, if the slave girls want to remain chaste (v. 33).

Then verses 35-45 celebrate Allah. He is the light of the heavens and the earth (v. 35, the verse that gives this sura its name), and of the homes of the believers who pray and gives alms (vv. 36-37) – while the unbelievers live in darkness (vv. 39-40). All beings praise him in their own way (v. 41); he rules the natural world (vv. 43-44); he created every animal from water (v. 45).

But still there are those who don't believe or only pretend to believe, and these are excoriated again, while the believers are praised, in verse 46-57. Allah has sent down signs (ayat, revelations or verses of the Qur'an, v. 46), but some only pretend to believe in Allah and Muhammad: they are not really believers (v. 47). Some of them don't even come when Muhammad summons them (v. 48); if they were right, they would have come to him obediently (v. 49). They are wrongdoers (v. 50), while the believers, when Muhammad summons them, answer "We hear and obey" (v. 51). Those who obey Allah and Muhammad will be victorious in the end (v. 52) – a conviction that sustains many a jihadist today through setbacks and defeats.

The Hypocrites swear they'll leave their homes if Muhammad commanded it, but rather than swearing mighty oaths, they should just obey (v. 53). Ibn Kathir explains: "Allah says about the hypocrites who had promised the Messenger and sworn that if he were to command them to go out for battle, they would go." However, of the Hypocrites "it is known that your obedience is merely verbal and is not accompanied by action. Every time you swear an oath you lie." If they turn away from Muhammad's message, they will bear the responsibility; he has done his duty by calling them to Islam (v. 54).

Then comes a momentous promise: Allah will establish the believers as rulers of the earth (v. 55). "This is a promise," says Ibn Kathir, "from Allah to His Messenger that He would cause his Ummah [community] to become successors on earth, i.e., they would become the leaders and rulers of mankind, through whom He would reform the world and to whom people would submit, so that they would have in exchange a safe security after their fear." Ibn Kathir then says "this is what Allah did indeed do," and recounts some of the early Islamic conquests.

Verses 58-64 lay down instructions for when the believers' slaves and children must ask permission before coming in Muhammad's presence (vv. 58-59); allow elderly women to go uncovered in public (although modesty is better) (v. 60); and greetings and eating together (v. 61), as well as direct the believers to ask permission before leaving Muhammad's presence (v. 62), for Muhammad's summons is not like that of an ordinary man (v. 63).

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 25, "The Criterion"

The name of this late Meccan sura is Al-Furqan (الفرقان), which is variously translated as the criterion, the canon, the standard. The word appears in v. 1, where it is identified as the Qur'an. The Tafsir al-Jalalayn says that the Qur'an is "called thus [al-furqan] because it has discriminated (faraqa) between truth and falsehood."

Allah sent it to Muhammad, the Tafsir al-Jalalayn continues, "that he may be to all the worlds, [to] mankind and the jinn, but not the angels, a warner, a threatening of God's chastisement." Why not to the angels? Perhaps because the angels "resist not Allah in that which He commandeth them" (66:6), and thus have no need of Muhammad's warning. But he has been sent to everyone on earth, as he himself explains in a hadith: "Every Prophet used to be sent to his nation only but I have been sent to all mankind."

The opening verse of this sura is also one of the apparent (and unacknowledged by Islamic commentators) exceptions to the rule that Allah is the lone speaker in the Qur'an — unless he is blessing himself for delivering the Qur'an to Muhammad. Following this there comes in verses 2-10 yet another passage chastising the unbelievers for rejecting Muhammad's message. Allah has dominion over all things and has no son (v. 2), yet the unbelievers have taken along with him other gods that can create nothing and do not have his power over life and death (v. 3). From this it would appear that the unbelievers don't reject Allah — they just worship other gods with him. This could be a reference to the Christian Trinity or to the pagan Arabs who worshipped Allah along with many other gods, or both.

The unbelievers charge Muhammad with lying (v. 4) and say that in his Qur'an he is merely repeating "tales of the ancients, which he has caused to be written: and they are dictated before him morning and evening" (v. 5). These charges stung Muhammad, as they're often rebutted in the Qur'an. In another place we learn that the man who was allegedly dictating to Muhammad was a foreigner: "We know indeed that they say, 'It is a man that teaches him.' The tongue of him they wickedly point to is notably foreign, while this is Arabic, pure and clear" (16:103). Then there is an unnamed figure who, according to a hadith, "was a Christian who embraced Islam and read Surat-al-Baqara [sura 2] and Al-Imran [sura 3], and he used to write (the revelations) for the Prophet." That is, he used to transcribe Muhammad's Qur'anic recitations. Evidently this experience disabused him of the notion that they were divinely inspired, for "later on he returned to Christianity again and he used to say: 'Muhammad knows nothing but what I have written for him.'"

Allah reacted with fury to one person who made these charges: the deity pointed out that the man was illegitimate ("base-born") and promised to brand him on the nose (68:10-16). He also calls down divine woe upon "those who write the Book with their own hands, and then say: 'This is from Allah,' to traffic with it for miserable price!" (2:79). And when speaking of the People of the Book, Allah tells Muhammad: "There is among them a section who distort the Book with their tongues: (as they read) you would think it is a part of the Book, but it is no part of the Book; and they say, 'That is from Allah,' but it is not from Allah!" (3:78). These and other passages suggest that some people around Muhammad mocked his prophetic pretensions by representing their own writings, or folkloric or apocryphal material, as divine revelation, and selling them to him.

The unbelievers also complain that Muhammad is an ordinary man, and ask why an angel wasn't sent down instead (v. 7). Muhammad, they scoff, doesn't even have a garden (v. 8), although Allah tells him he could give him the Gardens of Paradise (v. 10). Then verses 11-34 warn of the dreadful Day of Judgment, when the unbelievers will lament, "Oh! would that I had taken a (straight) path

with the Messenger!” (v. 27) and will realize the terrible mistake they made in taking the Qur’an to be “foolish nonsense” (v. 30). Meanwhile, as the fearsome Day unfolds, the believers will rest in the Garden (v. 24). In verses 35-42 Allah briefly recalls Moses and Noah, and notes that the people to whom they and other prophets were sent received them with scorn also, and were utterly destroyed (vv. 36, 39). Yet they continue to mock Muhammad’s claim to be a prophet, and will soon receive their penalty (vv. 40-41).

Verses 43-77 then detail some of Allah’s powers in governing the natural order of the earth — but the unbelievers are “like cattle” (v. 44) who are insensate amid all this evidence. Allah could have sent a prophet to every town (v. 51) — but of course we have already seen that he has sent Muhammad for all people (v. 1). Muhammad should “strive against” the unbelievers “with the utmost strenuousness” (v. 52) — in Arabic, “jihad against them a great jihad” (جَاهِدْهُمْ بِهِ جِهَادًا كَبِيرًا). According to the *Tanwîr al-Miqbâs min Tafsîr Ibn ‘Abbâs*, this should be done “by means of the Qur’an” and “by the sword.”

Allah has created mankind from water (v. 54), but the idols are powerless (v. 55). Muhammad has been sent to give good news and a warning (v. 56) — “meaning,” says Ibn Kathir, “a bringer of good news to the believers, a warner to the disbelievers; bringing good news of Paradise to those who obey Allah, and bringing warnings of a dreadful punishment for those who go against the commandments of Allah.” Allah created everything in six days (v. 59), although it seems to take eight days in 41:9-12. The unbelievers refuse to do Muhammad’s bidding — they won’t prostrate themselves to Al-Rahman, the Merciful (v. 60). Ibn Kathir explains that this comes from the time of the Treaty of Hudaibiyya between Muhammad and the pagan Arabs of Mecca. When Muhammad ordered that the treaty begin with “In the Name of Allah, Ar-Rahman (the Most Gracious), Ar-Rahim (the Most Merciful),” they responded: “We do not know Ar-Rahman or Ar-Rahim. Write what you used to write: ‘Bismika Allahumma (in Your Name, O Allah).’” This, along with v. 3, is another indication that Allah was one of the gods worshiped by the pagans before the advent of Islam. V. 60 is also one of the verses of prostration: the believer is to make a prostration whenever the verse is recited.

Those who “invoke not, with Allah, any other god, nor slay such life as Allah has made sacred except for just cause, nor commit fornication” (v. 68) will escape punishment, but those who do these things will receive double penalty on the Day of Judgment (v. 69). Allah will turn the evil done by those who repent, believe and do good works into good (v. 70). But Allah is not made uneasy by the unbelievers’ refusal to accept Islam; however, because they have rejected him, punishment is inevitable (v. 77).

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 26, "The Poets"

This is a Meccan sura; its name comes from v. 224, which tells us that only those who are going astray follow the poets. The import of this is that Muhammad, of course, is not a poet, and the Qur'an not merely a poetical work, but a divine revelation, although the pagans of Mecca persistently refuse to accept this.

And that refusal causes Muhammad constant distress (verses 2-9). Allah worries that Muhammad will fret himself to death over their unbelief (v. 3), and assures him that if he willed, he could send down a sign that would make them all believe (v. 4). However, there no sooner comes a new message from Allah than they reject it (v. 5) – but soon they will discover that it really is true (v. 6). Haven't they even seen on earth the many signs of Allah's power (vv. 7-8)?

Then verses 10-68 return yet again to the story of Moses, which we have already seen in suras 2, 7, 10, 17, and 20. The comparisons to Muhammad's own story are frequent and unmistakable. When Allah tells him to go to preach to "the people of Pharaoh" (v. 11), Moses says to Allah: "I do fear that they will charge me with falsehood" (v. 12), just as they charged Muhammad (25:4). Moses is afraid the unbelievers will kill him (v. 14), just as they plotted to kill Muhammad (8:30). After Moses preaches to him, Pharaoh says Moses is a "veritable madman" (v. 27), just as the pagan Arabs have said about Muhammad (15:6).

Then follows the story of Moses's miracles, and the attempts by Pharaoh's sorcerers to replicate them. After Moses wins over Pharaoh's sorcerers and they profess belief in Allah (vv. 47-48), Pharaoh warns them that he will punish them by amputating their hands and feet on opposite sides or crucifying them (v. 49) – the same punishment that Allah commands for those who "wage war against Allah and His Messenger, and strive with might and main for mischief through the land" (5:33). But the sorcerers stand firm, hoping that Allah will forgive them for their past sins (vv. 50-51). Moses parts the sea (v. 63) and the Children of Israel pass to safety.

Verses 69-104 return to the story of Abraham (also told in suras 15, 19 and 21), again showing him confronting his people in their worship of idols. The idolaters readily tell Abraham that their idols are useless, and that they're only worshipping them because their fathers did (v. 74). "They knew that their idols could not do anything," says Ibn Kathir, "but they had seen their fathers doing this, so they made haste to follow in their footsteps." This recalls Ibn Ishaq's account of a delegation of Christians who came from the Yemeni city of Najran to see Muhammad. One of the leaders of this delegation was a bishop, Abu Haritha ibn 'Alqama, who received money, servants, and other favors from "the Christian kings of Byzantium." Abu Haritha, says Ibn Ishaq, knew that Muhammad was a prophet, and told the other members of the delegation that he was, but refused to accept him for fear of losing the loot that the Byzantines were lavishing upon him.

In other words, whether out of cultural inertia or love of money, the unbelievers are in bad faith: there is no consideration of the possibility that people might reject Islam simply because they don't think it is true. Everyone knows it is true, but some find it inconvenient, for various reasons, to admit that. Says Maududi: "The mentality of the disbeliever has been the same throughout the ages; their arguments and their objections, and their excuses and subterfuges for not believing have been similar and ultimately the fates that they met have also been the same."

Then comes, in verses 105-122, the story of Noah (also in suras 10, 11, and 23). Noah tells the unbelievers that he is only a "plain warner" (v. 115) – exactly like Muhammad (7:184). Noah then appeals to Allah to judge between himself and his people, and the people are accordingly drowned while he is saved in the ark (v. 119). This is a sign, but most still persist in unbelief (v. 121). In verses 123-140 there follows another account of the prophet Hud, whom we have met in suras 7 and

11. He too warns his people, but they reject him, and Allah destroys them (v. 139). Likewise in verses 141-159 the unbelievers reject the message of the prophet Salih (who also appears in suras 7 and 11), and are also destroyed (v. 158). Here is told again the story of the “she-camel of Allah,” a miraculous beast Salih brings forth in answer to the people’s demand for a sign (vv. 154-155). Says Ibn Kathir: “A crowd of them gathered and demanded that he immediately bring forth from the rock a she-camel that was ten months pregnant, and they pointed to a certain rock in their midst. Allah’s Prophet Salih made them promise that if he responded to their request, they would believe in him and follow him. So they agreed to that. The Prophet of Allah Salih, peace be upon him, stood and prayed, then he prayed to Allah to grant them their request. Then the rock to which they had pointed split open, revealing a she-camel that was ten months pregnant, exactly as they had requested. So some of them believed, but most of them disbelieved.” Indeed, some of them set upon the camel and hamstrung it (v. 157), for which they were duly punished.

The pattern continues. Verses 160-175 tell the story of Lot (also in suras 7 and 15). Lot castigates the unbelievers for their homosexuality (vv. 165-166) and Allah destroys them all (v. 172), rescuing Lot and his family – all except for one old woman (v. 171), a vestige of Lot’s wife of Genesis 19:26. Verses 176-191 return to the prophet Shu’aib (who also appears in suras 7 and 11). The unbelievers charge that he is bewitched (v. 185), just as they say about Muhammad (17:47), as well as a mortal man like them and a liar (v. 186) – again, just like Muhammad (17:93, 25:4).

The sura culminates with verses 192-227, which makes the point explicit: this is a revelation from Allah (v. 192), in plain Arabic (v. 194), as was prophesied in the earlier Scriptures (v. 196). Isn’t it a sign that the Children of Israel recognized it as such (v. 197)? That is, says Ibn Kathir, “is it not sufficient witness to the truth for them that the scholars of the Children of Israel found this Qur’an mentioned in the Scriptures which they study?” He asserts that “the fair-minded among them admitted that the attributes of Muhammad and his mission and his Ummah were mentioned in their Books, as was stated by those among them who believed, such as ‘Abdullah bin Salam, Salman Al-Farisi and others who met the Prophet.”

The unbelievers wouldn’t have believed a non-Arab messenger (vv. 198-199), and indeed, they will not believe until they taste hell (v. 201). Destruction will come suddenly, but Allah never destroys a population without warning it first (v. 208). So believe in Allah alone (v. 213), not the accursed poets (v. 224).

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 27, "The Ant"

According to Ibn Abbas and Jabir bin Zaid, suras 26, 27, and 28 were revealed to Muhammad in Mecca in that order, although the subject matter of the suras themselves still does not follow any chronological order.

A brief preamble (verses 1-6) asserts that the Qur'an "makes things clear" (v. 2). Those who pray regularly and give alms are assured of Paradise (v. 3). But Allah has made the evil deeds of those who don't believe in the afterlife seem good to them (v. 4). The Tafsir al-Jalalayn explains: "Truly those who do not believe in the Hereafter, We have adorned their vile deeds for them, by making such [deeds] seem sensuous so that they then deem them wholesome, and so they are bewildered, confused about why We deem these [deeds] to be vile." They'll be duly punished in the next life (v. 5).

Then verses 7-14 return once again to the story of Moses, which we have already seen in suras 2, 7, 10, 17, 20, and 26. This time we get a version of the story of the burning bush from Exodus 3:2ff (vv. 7-9), but no revelation of the Name of God (Exodus 3:14). Instead, the Qur'anic account fast-forwards to Exodus 4:2-6, in which Moses at God's bidding casts down his rod and sees it become a serpent (v. 10) and puts his hand inside his cloak, whereupon it becomes leprous and is then restored – although in the Qur'an, it merely turns white, without disease (v. 12). But Pharaoh and his court reject these signs "in iniquity and arrogance, though their souls were convinced thereof" (v. 14) – here again is a hint that people who reject Islam do so only because they are corrupt, even though they know it's true.

Verses 15-44 turn to the story of Solomon, focusing primarily on his meeting with the Queen of Sheba. Allah gave Solomon the gift of understanding the speech of birds (v. 16). He can also understand the ants, overhearing when one ant warns the others to flee before they're trampled by Solomon and those with him, as all the jinns, men, and birds come before him (vv. 17-19). Solomon is annoyed when he discovers that the hoopoe is not among the birds (v. 20), and vows to punish him (v. 21). However, the hoopoe comes in late with news of the Queen of Sheba, who has a magnificent kingdom (v. 23) – but she and her people are deceived by Satan and worship the sun (v. 24). The hoopoe himself is a pious Muslim (v. 26). Solomon sends the hoopoe with a letter for the Queen (v. 28), as much to test the hoopoe's veracity as anything else (v. 27). The letter begins with the standard Islamic invocation Bismillah ar-Rahman ar-Rahim (v. 30) — In the name of Allah, the compassionate, the merciful – and calls the Queen and her people to Islam (v. 31). The Queen consults with her advisers (v. 32) and resolves to send Solomon a gift (v. 35). Ibn Kathir explains this passage as "meaning, 'I will send him a gift befitting for one of his status, and will wait and see what his response will be. Perhaps he will accept that and leave us alone, or he will impose a tax which we can pay him every year, so that he will not fight us and wage war against us.'"

This idea seems modeled on the *jizya*, the tax prescribed for the *dhimmi*s (9:29): she seems prepared to pay a tax as a symbol of her submission to Solomon's authority. Qatadah, one of Muhammad's companions, marveled: "May Allah have mercy on her and be pleased with her — how wise she was as a Muslim and (before that) as an idolater! She understood how gift-giving has a good effect on people."

But Solomon rejected the gifts (vv. 36-37), intent instead on converting the Queen to Islam. Ibn Kathir paraphrases his response to the gifts: "Are you trying to flatter me with wealth so that I will leave you alone with your Shirk [worshipping others besides Allah] and your kingdom?" He is not disposed to leave them alone, as Muslims have never been disposed to leave infidel kingdoms alone, when they had the means to confront them. Solomon asks one of his men to bring him her throne (v. 38) and gets a volunteer (v. 39). The throne received (v. 40), Solomon orders it altered

slightly, to test the Queen's powers of recognition (v. 41). She recognizes it (v. 42), which, according to Ibn Kathir, shows "the ultimate in intelligence and strong resolve." She forsakes her other objects of worship and worships Allah alone (v. 43). Solomon devised the further test in v. 44, according to the Tafsir al-Jalalayn, to get a gander at the Queen's legs:

"It was, also, said to her, 'Enter the palace [hallway]' — this was a transparent white glass floor underneath which flowed sweet water that contained fish. Solomon had it made when he was told that her legs and feet resembled the shanks of a mule. And when she saw it, she supposed it to be a pool, of water, and so she bared her legs, to wade through it. Meanwhile Solomon was seated on his throne at the front part of the palace [hallway], and he saw that her legs and feet were [in fact] fair. He said, to her: 'It is a hallway paved [smooth] with crystal', and thereafter he called her to submit [to God]. She said, 'My Lord, indeed I have wronged myself, by worshipping other than You, and I submit with Solomon to God, the Lord of the Worlds'.

Solomon, says the Tafsir al-Jalalayn, "wanted to marry her but disliked the hair on her legs. So the devils made a [depilatory] lime mixture (nūra) and she removed it therewith. He married her and had [great] love for her."

Then comes in verses 45-53 the story of Salih (also in suras 7, 11, and 26), prophet of the people of Thamud, whom Allah destroys for their unbelief (vv. 51-52), and the story of Lot (verses 54-58 — also in suras 7, 15, and 26), who upbraids his people for their homosexuality (v. 55), and is saved with his family (except for his wife) while the city is destroyed (vv. 57-58).

Verses 59-65 detail some of the signs of Allah's power in the natural world. But in verses 66-74 the unbelievers are still perverse, objecting to the possibility of the resurrection of the dead (v. 67), saying again that these are just "tales of the ancients" (v. 68) and asking when the resurrection will happen (v. 71). Allah tells Muhammad to tell the unbelievers to travel the earth see what has become of those who sinned (v. 69) and not to grieve over their unbelief (v. 70).

Verses 75-93 extol the Qur'an, for it explains to the Children of Israel the things they dispute about (v. 76) and is a guide for the believers (v. 77). Allah will confront the unbelievers on the Day of Judgment (v. 84), and they will be unable to answer (v. 85). Those who do good will be saved (v. 89), while those who do evil will be thrown into the Fire (v. 90).

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 28, "The Story"

It has often been noted that while the Bible is (among many other things) a series of historical narratives, the Qur'an is a series of sermons. This is nowhere clearer than in the oft-repeated story of Moses. While the Bible's first five books contain the story of Moses in what is in the main a continuous narrative, the Qur'an tells parts of this story in suras 2, 7, 10, 17, 20, 26, 27 and this one (and elsewhere also).

There is a great deal of repetition and overlap, but there are also unique features of most every retelling. Each one has its own homiletic point: details of Moses' life are used to warn unbelievers or exhort believers to greater piety. As we saw last week, Ibn Abbas and Jabir bin Zaid say that suras 26, 27, and 28 were revealed in that order. Maududi says that "the different parts of the Prophet Moses story as mentioned in these surahs together make up a complete story." Still, if someone were to try to reconstruct the chronology of Moses' life by means of the Qur'an alone, it would be very difficult.

Meanwhile, the recurring preoccupation with Moses reinforces his status as a prophet of Islam, as well as the perversity of the Jews in not recognizing the congruence of Muhammad's message with that of Moses, and then becoming Muslims. Maududi emphasizes that, here again, the point of these retellings of Moses' story is not to make a point about Moses, but about Muhammad: "The main theme" of this sura, he says, "is to remove the doubts and objections that were being raised against the Prophethood of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (upon whom be Allah's peace and blessings) and to invalidate the excuses which were being offered for not believing in him. For this purpose, first the story of the Prophet Moses has been related...by analogy with the period of revelation."

Verses 2-43 tell Moses' story, echoing many elements of the Biblical account, although Haman is imported from another time and place (his story is in the Book of Esther) to be Pharaoh's assistant (v. 8). Allah tells Moses' mother to cast him into the river "when thou hast fears about him" (v. 7). She does, the "people of Pharaoh" rescue him (v. 8), and his mother, her identity not known to the Egyptians, becomes his nursemaid (v. 13). Moses declares he will never assist those who sin (v. 17) – a declaration that modern Salafis (rigorous, "pure" Muslims) link to Muhammad's saying recorded in the *Mishkat al-Masabih*, that someone who knowingly assists a tyrant is no longer a Muslim. This is their justification for opposing authoritarian rulers in Muslim countries who do not implement the fullness of Sharia (such as Mubarak and Musharraf).

Moses kills an Egyptian and Allah forgives him (vv. 15-16), but his deed becomes known (v. 19) and Moses flees to Midian (v. 22). There he agrees to work for the unnamed Jethro in exchange for his daughter's hand in marriage (v. 27). He sees the burning bush (v. 29), encounters Allah (v. 30), and is given the miracles of the rod (v. 31) and his white hand (v. 32) to show Pharaoh. Pharaoh dismisses his preaching as "sorcery" (v. 36), just as the unbelievers will say about Muhammad (11:7, 15:15). And after Allah flings Pharaoh and his hosts into the sea (v. 40), we get to the point of the story.

That point is in verses 44-55: the fact that Muhammad knows these details of Moses' life, when he wasn't there to witness them, is proof that Muhammad is a prophet. Ibn Kathir explains: "Allah points out the proof of the prophethood of Muhammad, whereby he told others about matters of the past, and spoke about them as if he were hearing and seeing them for himself. But he was an illiterate man who could not read books, and he grew up among a people who knew nothing of such things." So we see Allah reminding Muhammad that he wasn't present at various events in Moses' life (vv. 44-46). Yet the pagan Arabs demand that Muhammad perform miracles as Moses did, even though they don't believe in Moses either (v. 48); "they only follow their own lusts" (v. 50). The People of the Book know that the Qur'an is true — "this was revealed," says the *Tafsir al-Jalalayn*,

“regarding certain Jews who became Muslims, such as ‘Abd Allāh b. Salām and others, and [certain] Christians who had come from Abyssinia and Syria [who also became Muslims].”

Verses 56-75 excoriate the perversity of the unbelievers, in ignoring and denying the clear signs of Allah. Allah guides whom he will; Muhammad will not be able to bring to the truth all those he loves (v. 56) – yet another verse indicating that belief and unbelief is solely in Allah’s hands. This verses was revealed,” Ibn Kathir explains, “concerning Abu Talib, the paternal uncle of the Messenger of Allah” — and the father of Ali, the hero of the Shi’ites. Abu Talib “used to protect the Prophet, support him and stand by him. He loved the Prophet dearly, but this love was a natural love, i.e., born of kinship, not a love that was born of the fact that he was the Messenger of Allah. When he was on his deathbed, the Messenger of Allah called him to Faith and to enter Islam, but the decree overtook him and he remained a follower of disbelief, and Allah’s is the complete wisdom.”

Allah will taunt the unbelievers on the Day of Judgment, asking them where his “partners” are (vv. 62, 74-75). Verses 76-88 follow this with the story of Qarun (Korah of Number 16:1-40), who rebelled against Moses. Qarun trusts in his great wealth instead of worshipping Allah (v. 78). According to a hadith, Abu Hurayra, one of Muhammad’s companions, recalled Muhammad saying that only three things actually belong to the man who glories in his riches: the food he eats, the clothes he wears out, and the money he spends in the cause of Allah. “All else,” said Muhammad, “he will leave for his heirs.” No doubt about that.

Those “whose aim is the life of this world” (v. 79) envied him, but the righteous knew better (v. 80), and sure enough, in due time Allah “caused the earth to swallow up him and his house” (v. 81). Muhammad should “never be a helper to the disbelievers” (v. 86) – “rather,” says Ibn Kathir, “separate from them, express your hostility towards them and oppose them.” For in the end, everything will perish except His Face” (v. 88) – that is, everything except Allah. This might seem to contradict the idea of the eternity of Paradise and hell, but the *Tanwîr al-Miqbâs min Tafsîr Ibn ‘Abbâs* glosses it in this way: “all works that are for other than Allah’s Countenance...will not be accepted...except that which is meant for the sake of His Countenance.”

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 29, "The Spider"

This sura's name comes from v. 41, which compares those who trust in anyone or anything besides Allah to spiders, who labor to build webs that are "the flimsiest of houses." Maududi says that sura 29 was revealed during "the period of extreme persecution of the Muslims" at Mecca, although he considers and then dismisses the possibility that the first section, since it rails against the Hypocrites who so plagued Muhammad in Medina, were revealed later, during the Medinan period. Evidently the Hypocrites were always about.

Verses 1-13 focus on them, saying that it is not enough to profess belief in Islam, but that believers must be tested (vv. 2-3). The Hypocrites in this case are actually weaklings, who mistake human oppression for the wrath of Allah (v. 10). Allah asks, "Do those who practice evil think that they will get the better of Us? Evil is their judgment!" (v. 4). Even if a believer's own parents urge one to worship anything or anyone besides Allah, he shouldn't obey them (v. 8). Ibn Kathir elucidates this: "If they are idolaters, and they try to make you follow them in their religion, then beware of them, and do not obey them in that." The unbelievers tell the believers that if they forsake Islam and follow them, the unbelievers will bear the penalty for the believers' sins, but they are, of course, lying (v. 12).

Then in verses 14-39 Allah then once again invokes various prophets: Noah (vv. 14-15); Abraham (vv. 16-27); Lot (vv. 28-35); Shu'aib (vv. 36-38); and Moses (v. 39). Says Maududi: "The stories mentioned in this Surah also impress the same point mostly, as if to say, 'Look at the Prophets of the past: they were made to suffer great hardships and were treated cruelly for long periods. Then, at last they were helped by Allah. Therefore, take heart: Allah's succour will certainly come. But a period of trial and tribulation has to be undergone.' Besides teaching this lesson to the Muslims, the disbelievers also have been warned, as if to say, 'If you are not being immediately seized by Allah, you should not form the wrong impression that you will never be seized. The signs of the doomed nations of the past are before you. Just see how they met their doom and how Allah succoured the Prophets.'" The warning to those who have heard and rejected Muhammad is clear.

Along the way, many familiar notes are sounded: the truth of Allah is evident from creation (v. 20); Allah grants mercy to whom he pleases and punishes those whom he wishes to punish (v. 21): says Ibn Kathir, "He is the Ruler Who is in control, Who does as He wishes and judges as He wants, and there is none who can put back His judgement. None can question Him about what He does; rather it is they who will be questioned, for His is the power to create and to command, and whatever He decides is fair and just, for He is the sovereign who cannot be unjust in the slightest." Those who reject his signs (ayat, or verses of the Qur'an) will be severely punished (v. 23).

In verses 40-57 Allah tells Muhammad to keep preaching, but only those with knowledge will understand his message (v. 43). Consequently one early Muslim, Amr bin Murrah, remarked: "I never came across an Ayah [verse] of the Book of Allah that I did not know, but it grieved me" – because his lack of understanding indicated that he didn't have the requisite knowledge. This verse may be why it is so common today for Muslims to charge that non-Muslims who speak about the Islamic jihad ideology and Islamic supremacism do not understand Islamic texts and teachings; if they did understand them, they would become Muslims. The Qur'an's meaning is clear in the hearts of the believers (v. 49): the Tafsir al-Jalalayn explains that it is clear "in the breasts of those who have been given knowledge, namely, the believers, who preserve it [in their hearts], and none denies Our signs except wrongdoers, namely, the Jews — they denied them after they were manifested to them."

Allah tells Muhammad not to get into arguments with the Jews and Christians, "except by better means," unless it is with one of them who is a wrongdoer – and to tell them that Muslims, Jews and

Christians all worship the same deity (v. 46). The Tafsir al-Jalalayn says that this means Muslims should not argue with Jews and Christians except by “calling [them] to God by [reference to] His signs and pointing out His arguments; except those of them who have done wrong, by waging war and refusing to accept [to pay] the jizya-tax.” Muslims should “dispute with these using the sword, until such time as they submit or pay the jizya-tax,” and remind them that we all worship the same God.

Another early Muslim, Ibn Abbas, told the Muslims it was unnecessary to ask the Jews and Christians religious questions when the Muslims had the Qur’an: “Why do you ask the people of the scripture about anything while your Book (Quran) which has been revealed to Allah’s Apostle is newer and the latest? You read it pure, undistorted and unchanged, and Allah has told you that the people of the scripture (Jews and Christians) changed their scripture and distorted it, and wrote the scripture with their own hands and said, ‘It is from Allah,’ to sell it for a little gain. Does not the knowledge which has come to you prevent you from asking them about anything?”

Allah reminds Muhammad that he never read or recited any Scripture before the Qur’an (v. 48) – meaning, says Ibn Kathir, that “you lived among your people for a long time before you brought this Qur’an. During this time you never read any book or wrote anything. Your people, as well as others all know that you are an unlettered man who does not read or write.” This, of course, is the substance of the miracle claimed of the Qur’an itself – that this sublime poetry came to an illiterate man. The unbelievers ask for miracles, but Muhammad’s job is only to warn them about Allah’s judgment (v. 50), and the Qur’an is enough for that (v. 51). The unbelievers will be punished as Allah taunts them: “Taste ye (the fruits) of your deeds!” (v. 55).

Verses 58-69 promise Paradise (v. 58) to those who persevere in patient faith (v. 59). This world is just “a pastime and a game” (v. 64) – the real life is in the next world. But most people do not understand, even though they know Allah created and sustains all things (vv. 63, 65). Allah will guide to the truth those who strive (jahadoo, a form of “jihad”) in his cause (v. 69) – suggesting that one who difficulty believing should fight for Islam, and will thereby come to understand it better. As Ibn Abbas explains: “whoever acts upon what he knows,” Allah “shall give him success to know that which he do not know.”

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 30, "The Byzantines," and Sura 31, "Luqman"

After many passages in which the unbelievers ask Muhammad for a sign that he is a genuine prophet, but are rebuffed (6:37; 10:20; 13:7; 13:27), in sura 30 he delivers an actual prophesy – although this Meccan sura likely predates most, if not all, of the recorded demands for a sign. The prophecy regards the fate of the Byzantine Empire: the title of this surah is Ar-Rum (الرُّومُ), which literally means "The Romans," but refers to the forces of the Eastern Roman Empire, commonly known today as the Byzantine Empire. I have thus entitled it here "The Byzantines."

Allah says that the Byzantines have been defeated (v. 2), but will be victorious within a few years (v. 4). The Persians defeated them in 615 A.D., taking Jerusalem. According to the Tafsir al-Jalalayn, the pagan Arabs used this news to taunt the Muslims: "The Meccan disbelievers rejoiced in this [defeat of the Byzantines] and said to the Muslims, 'We shall vanquish you as the Persians vanquished the Byzantines.'" But Muhammad was right: in 622, the Byzantines defeated the Persians and soon drove them out of Asia Minor. In 630, they retook Jerusalem.

Abdullah Yusuf Ali points out that the word translated "a few years" – bid' (يَضَعُ) – means "a period of three to nine years," although it's not clear why Allah wouldn't be more specific when he knows everything (6:59). Whether or not the Byzantine victories fulfill the prophecy depends on whether one wants to see in them confirmation or disconfirmation that Muhammad was a prophet. Maududi declares: "The prediction made in the initial verses of this Surah is one of the most outstanding evidences of the Quran's being the Word of Allah and the Holy Prophet Muhammad's being a true Messenger of Allah."

The outcome was the will of Allah (v. 5). His promises are trustworthy, although most men don't understand (v. 6); they don't realize that those who rejected Allah's previous messengers were destroyed (v. 9). Those evil people who reject and ridicule Allah's signs (ayat, which can be understood as verses of the Qur'an as well as signs in nature), will suffer extreme evil themselves (v. 10).

Verses 11-16 repeat warnings of the Day of Judgment: those who associated partners with Allah will find no help from those partners (v. 13); the righteous will enjoy delights while those who reject Allah's signs will be punished (v. 16). Then verses 17-29 sing Allah's praises, pointing out various features of the natural world as signs of his presence and power, including the creation of women as companions of men and the harmony between the two (v. 21). Ibn Kathir explains: "If Allah had made all of Adam's progeny male, and created the females from another kind, such as from Jinn or animals, there would never have been harmony between them and their spouses. There would have been revulsion if the spouses had been from a different kind. Out of Allah's perfect mercy He made their wives from their own kind, and created love and kindness between them."

Other signs are the creation of heaven and earth, the variations of languages and colors (v. 22); sleep (v. 23); and lightning and rain (v. 24). But the unbelievers just follow their own lusts, rather than paying heed – and no one can guide those who Allah leaves astray (v. 29). (Here again is yet another indication that belief and unbelief are up to Allah, who, after all, has created some men just to torture them in hell – see 7:179).

Verses 30-45 continue to excoriate the unbelievers for their lack of faith. The righteous should not split up their religion into sects (v. 32). Ibn Kathir says that this refers to "the Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, idol worshippers and all the followers of false religions, besides the followers of Islam." Muhammad himself said: "The Jews were split up into seventy-one or seventy-two sects; and the Christians were split up into seventy one or seventy-two sects; and my community will be

split up into seventy-three sects.” But one sect will have the truth. Ibn Kathir continues: “The followers of the religions before us had differences of opinions and split into false sects, each group claiming to be following the truth. This Ummah too has split into sects, all of which are misguided apart from one, which is Ahlus-Sunnah Wal-Jama’ah [the People of the Prophet’s Way and Community], those who adhere to the Book of Allah and the Sunnah of the Messenger of Allah and what was followed by the first generations, the Companions, their followers, and the Imams of the Muslims of earlier and later times.”

Men cry to Allah when they’re in trouble (v. 33), but are otherwise ungrateful (v. 34). Allah has given man everything – which of his “partners” can do these things (v. 40)? Men should embrace the true religion before it’s too late (v. 43).

Verses 46-60 return to the signs of Allah in nature – specifically, the winds (vv. 46, 48), but the unbelievers continue to be ungrateful (v. 51). The Qur’an contains every kind of parable, but the unbelievers dismiss it as “vanities” (v. 58). Allah has sealed up their hearts (v. 59).

Another Meccan sura, Sura 31 is named for Luqman the wise. Abdur-Rahman bin Harmalah told this story: “A black man came to Sa’id bin Al-Musayyib to ask him a question, and Sa’id bin Al-Musayyib said to him: ‘Do not be upset because you are black, for among the best of people were three who were black,’” including “Luqman the Wise, who was a black Nubian with thick lips.”

Verses 1-5 praise the Qur’an, which is a “guide and mercy” to the righteous (v. 3). However, verses 6-11 return to the unbelievers, who ridicule Islam (v. 6) and turn away in arrogance when the Qur’an is recited (v. 7).

Luqman, by contrast, tells his son not to join partners with Allah, “for false worship is indeed the highest wrong-doing” (v. 13). The highest wrongdoing: as the Invitation to Islam newsletter explained in 1997: “Murder, rape, child molesting and genocide. These are all some of the appalling crimes which occur in our world today. Many would think that these are the worst possible offences which could be committed. But there is something which outweighs all of these crimes put together: It is the crime of shirk” – that is, associating partners with Allah. A man should be good to his parents (v. 14) unless they try to get him to worship other gods (v. 15) – as apparently some pagan Meccans were trying to do with their Muslim convert children.

In verses 20-34, Allah returns to the perversity of the unbelievers in not reckoning with the many signs of his reality. He tells Muhammad not to grieve over the unbelievers (v. 23), for they will soon be subjected to unrelenting punishment (v. 24), for they know Allah created all, but do not understand that must obey him (v. 25). His words are inexhaustible (v. 27), and men should not be deceived by this present life into ignoring them (v. 33).

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 32, "The Prostration"

Sura 32, "The Prostration," dates from the middle of the Meccan period, and repeats many familiar preoccupations we have seen in other chapters of the Qur'an. Maududi says that "the main theme of the Surah is to remove the doubts of the people concerning Tauhid [the absolute oneness of Allah], the Hereafter and the Prophethood, and to invite them to all these three realities."

The attentive reader of this Blogging the Qur'an series, particularly over the last few weeks, may have noticed that these themes — removing doubts of the people concerning the unity of Allah, the Day of Judgment, and Muhammad's status as a prophet — are concerns of many, many other passages of the Qur'an outside of this chapter, and so sura 32 essentially stands as a kind of recapitulation and review of many things we have seen thus far. Repetition, of course, is a pedagogical tool, particularly in an oral culture.

And so we hear again in it that the Qur'an is true beyond doubt and Muhammad has not forged it (vv. 1-2); and that Allah created everything in six days and no one will protect or intercede for anyone else on the Day of Judgment (v. 4); and that Allah knows everything (v. 6); and that human beings were created from clay (v. 7); and that the unbelievers deny the resurrection of the dead (v. 10); and that Allah will taunt the unbelievers on the Day of Judgment and when he casts them into hell, telling them to "taste the penalty" of their evil-doing (vv. 14, 20); and that those who believe pray and give alms (vv. 15-16) and will receive a reward (v. 17). (Incidentally, when Muslims hear v. 15's reference to prostration, and other verses of the Qur'an that refer to prostration, they themselves are supposed to make a prostration; some editions of the Qur'an come with a sign in the margins by each prostration verse, so that the reader can be prepared for what is coming.)

In connection with all this, an early Muslim, Mu'adh bin Jabal, once asked Muhammad: "O Prophet of Allah, tell me of a deed that will grant me admittance to Paradise and keep me away from Hell." Muhammad replied: "You have asked about something great, and it is easy for the one for whom Allah makes it easy. Worship Allah and do not associate anything with Him, establish regular prayer, pay Zakah, fast Ramadan and perform pilgrimage to the House." Then he asked Mu'adh: "Shall I not tell you of the greatest of all things and its pillars and pinnacle?" When Mu'adh replied in the affirmative, Muhammad said: "The greatest of all things is Islam, its pillars are the prayers and its pinnacle is Jihad for the sake of Allah." And he told Mu'adh that all that depends on restraining one's tongue.

The unbelievers are not equal to the believers (v. 18) — for indeed, the believers are the "best of people" (3:110) while the unbelievers are "the most vile of created beings" (98:6).

We see something new in the statement that everything Allah created is good (v. 7). This appears to contradict the idea that Allah created many jinns and men for hell (7:179 and v. 13 of this sura). However, the Imam Malik says that this only means that "he created everything well and in a goodly fashion," not that everything he created is itself good. In v. 13 is also repeated the assertion that Allah would have guided all human beings to the truth if he had so desired — indicating here again that Allah does not, unlike the God of the Bible, will "that all men be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth" (I Timothy 2:3).

The unbelievers will be punished in this life as well as the next (v. 21). This is an idea that has implications for the political aspect of Islam — since the dhimmis, that is, the People of the Book (primarily Jews and Christians) in the Islamic state are to offer "willing submission" to the Muslims and "feel themselves subdued" (9:29), it becomes the responsibility of the Islamic state to make sure that that happens, so that they taste the penalty for their unbelief not just in the next life but in this one also. Ibn 'Abbas and many others have explained the idea of v. 21 in this way: "The near

torment means diseases and problems in this world, and the things that happen to its people as a test from Allah to His servants so that they will repent to Him.” These tests are in part to be instituted by the Islamic state, imposing second-class status and institutionalized discrimination upon the dhimmis in order to move them to repentance and conversion. For there is no worse sinner than one who ignores Allah’s signs (v. 22) — which, as we have seen, include the verses of the Qur’an.

More familiar themes follow: Allah reminds Muhammad that he gave a book to Moses (v. 23), although we are not here given yet another recapitulation of the whole story of Moses or any significant portion of it. However, as it was in earlier retellings of incidents in Moses’ career (as we have seen on more than one occasion), Maududi says that the point here is about Muhammad again: “Then it is said: ‘This is not the first and novel event of its kind that a Book has been sent down upon a man from God. Before this the Book had been sent upon Moses also, which you all know. There is nothing strange in this at which you should marvel. Be assured that this Book has come down from God, and note it well that the same will happen now as has already happened in the time of Moses. Leadership now will be bestowed only on those who will accept this Divine Book. Those who reject it shall be doomed to failure.’”

Pickthall translates the next clause of v. 23 as “so be not ye in doubt of his receiving it,” but the Tafsir al-Jalalayn and others have it as “do not be in doubt concerning the encounter with him,” and consider it to refer to Muhammad’s Night Journey to Paradise, during which he met Moses and other prophets. Allah appointed leaders for the Children of Israel (v. 24), and on Judgment Day will judge between their squabbling factions (v. 25). Don’t they realize the lesson in the people Allah has previously destroyed (v. 26)? Don’t they see the signs in the things of nature (v. 27)? Yet they scoff, asking when the Day will be (v. 28). Allah tells Muhammad to tell them that it won’t do any good to become a believer on that Day (v. 29).

Next week: Sura 33, “The Confederates,” about Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and Jefferson Davis – no wait, it’s actually about several key battles in the early history of Muhammad’s Medina period, and even includes Allah’s orders to Muhammad to marry his former daughter-in-law. That incident, which is touched upon only obliquely in sura 33, is one of the most notorious incidents in Muhammad’s entire tumultuous prophetic career, and a hot topic of discussion ever since among both Islamic apologists and their opponents.

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 33, "The Confederates," verses 1-27

This Medinan sura provides a principal foundation for the central role of Muhammad, and hence of the Hadith (traditions of his words and deeds), in the formulation of Islamic law. It also contains a dramatic example of Allah's solicitude for his prophet, further solidifying his pivotal role.

In verses 1-8, Allah tells Muhammad not to listen to the unbelievers and hypocrites (v. 1), but rather to follow divine inspiration (v. 2). We get a hint of what this is about when Allah says that no man has two hearts, a man cannot make his wife his mother, and a man cannot make an adopted son a real son (v. 4). In those days men would divorce their wives by telling them, "You are to me like the back of my mother" – the Qur'an is here saying that this doesn't affect any real change or make them actually into their mothers, but the point here is not about divorce. Rather, the passage is intended to end the practice of adoption, starting with Muhammad's own family. Ibn Kathir explains: "This was revealed concerning Zayd bin Harithah...the freed servant of the Prophet. The Prophet had adopted him before prophethood, and he was known as Zayd bin Muhammad. Allah wanted to put an end to this naming and attribution." An adopted son should be known by the name of his natural father: he can never truly enter into his adoptive household (v. 5).

Why was Allah so intent on ending the practice of adoption? Because Muhammad wanted to marry Zayd's ex-wife, Zaynab bint Jahsh — and as a result of his dalliance with his former daughter-in-law, says Maududi, "the hypocrites and the Jews and the mushriks [unbelievers] who were already bent on mischief would get a fresh excuse to start a propaganda campaign against Islam." So Allah here emphasizes that an adopted son cannot be a true son, and so by extension Zaynab was never really Muhammad's daughter-in-law at all, and there is no cause for scandal.

This sura will return to this subject later, but at this point it turns, in verses 9-27, to a discussion of the Battle of the Trench. Anticipating an attack by the pagan Arabs, whereupon Muhammad had a trench dug around Medina. According to Muhammad's earliest biographer, Ibn Ishaq, once when Muhammad was helping the trench diggers, he wielded a pick at a large rock, and every time he hacked at the rock, lightning shot from the pick. One of the Muslims asked Muhammad: "O you, dearer than father or mother [cf. v. 6], what is the meaning of this light beneath your pick as you strike?"

Muhammad replied: "The first means that God has opened up to me the Yemen; the second Syria and the west; and the third the east."

As the Quraysh, along with another tribe, the Ghatafan (known collectively in Islamic tradition as "the Confederates," as in v. 20), laid siege to Medina, the trench prevented the invaders from entering the city. Yet the Muslims were unable to force them to end the siege. Then to make matters even worse, a tribe of Jews in Medina, the Banu Qurayzah, broke their covenant with Muhammad (perhaps after seeing how Muhammad had exiled two other Jewish tribes, the Banu Qaynuqa and Banu Nadir) and began collaborating with the Quraysh.

As the siege dragged on, according to Ibn Ishaq, one Muslim remarked bitterly about Muhammad's designs on the Persian empire of Chosroes and the Byzantine empire of Caesar: "Muhammad used to promise us that we should eat the treasures of Chosroes and Caesar and today not one of us can feel safe in going to the privy!" Allah responded by saying that those who complain that "Allah and His Messenger promised us nothing but delusion!" have diseased hearts (v. 12). Allah accused these hypocrites of demoralizing the Muslims and of treasonous plotting with the enemies of Islam (vv. 13-14). Allah also told Muhammad to tell the people that desertion would be useless (v. 16).

The Qurayzah agreed to attack the Muslims from one side while the Quraysh besieged them from

the other. But then a new convert to Islam, Nu'aym bin Mas'ud, came to Muhammad offering to trick the Confederate tribes, since his own people, the Ghatafan, did not know that he had become a Muslim. Muhammad responded, according to Ibn Ishaq: "You are only one man among us, so go and awake distrust among the enemy to draw them off us if you can, for war is deceit." Nu'aym's deception turned the Confederates against each other and against their Jewish allies; soon afterward, they ended the siege. Nu'aym's deception had saved Islam.

According to Aisha, "When Allah's Apostle returned on the day (of the battle) of Al-Khandaq (i.e. Trench), he put down his arms and took a bath. Then Gabriel whose head was covered with dust, came to him saying, 'You have put down your arms! By Allah, I have not put down my arms yet.' Allah's Apostle said, 'Where (to go now)?' Gabriel said, 'This way,' pointing towards the tribe of Bani Quraiza. So Allah's Apostle went out towards them."

Ibn Ishaq recounts that Muhammad addressed the Qurayzah Jews contemptuously: "You brothers of monkeys, has God disgraced you and brought His vengeance upon you?" (The Qur'an three times — 2:62-65; 5:59-60; and 7:166 — says that Allah transformed the disobedient Jews into pigs and monkeys.) The Muslims laid siege to the Qurayzah strongholds until, said Ibn Ishaq, the Jews "were sore pressed" and Allah "cast terror into their hearts." Muhammad entrusted the fate of the tribe to the Muslim warrior Sa'd bin Mu'adh, who decreed: "I give the judgment that their warriors should be killed and their children and women should be taken as captives."

Muhammad exclaimed: "O Sa'd! You have judged amongst them with the judgment of the King Allah." According to Ibn Ishaq, "The apostle went out to the market of Medina (which is still its market today) and dug trenches in it. Then he sent for [the men of the Qurayzah] and struck off their heads in those trenches as they were brought out to him in batches." Ibn Ishaq puts the number of those massacred at "600 or 700 in all, though some put the figure as high as 800 or 900." Ibn Sa'd says "they were between six hundred and seven hundred in number."

One hadith summarizes Muhammad's dealings with the three Jewish tribes of Medina: "Bani An-Nadir and Bani Quraiza fought (against the Prophet violating their peace treaty), so the Prophet exiled Bani An-Nadir and allowed Bani Quraiza to remain at their places (in Medina) taking nothing from them till they fought against the Prophet again). He then killed their men and distributed their women, children and property among the Muslims, but some of them came to the Prophet and he granted them safety, and they embraced Islam. He exiled all the Jews from Medina." The Qur'an refers obliquely to the massacre, saying that Allah "cast terror" into the hearts of the People of the Book who aided the pagans, "(so that) some ye slew, and some ye made prisoners" (v. 26). Victory came from Allah alone (vv. 9-11).

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 33, "The Confederates," verses 21-73

A few years ago Khaleel Mohammed, a professor at San Diego State University and a popular "moderate Muslim," [said this](#) about me: "He misquotes verses of the Qur'an, takes things out of context, and shamelessly lies." Since I do not misquote verses of the Qur'an, take things out of context, or shamelessly lie, I contacted him and asked for either documentation of his charges or a retraction. He responded: "As for shameless lies, I stand by my assertion, especially after received material in which you claim Muhammad married his daughter in law etc."

As it happens, on Friday at FreedomFest I debated Professor Daniel C. Peterson, author of *Muhammad: Prophet of God*. Dr. Peterson is a good man and a careful scholar, and picking up a copy of his book I noticed that on pages 167-168 he tells the story of Muhammad and his daughter-in-law Zaynab in much the way I have told it in [this week's Blogging the Qur'an installment](#), as well as in my book [The Truth About Muhammad](#): Muhammad "was in love with" Zaynab; his adopted son Zayd offered "to yield up his wife to the Prophet if the Prophet so desired," but Muhammad refused; Muhammad then received a divine revelation and announced, "Who will go to Zaynab, and tell her of the good news that God has given her to me in marriage?"; and now "Zayd, despite Muhammad's formal adoption of him, was not to be considered Muhammad's son."

So apparently Professor Peterson has descended with me to the level of "shameless lies."

The author of the Foreword to Professor Peterson's book says that he "has approached his work as the consummate academic." He says that the book itself is "admirable" and is a "welcome addition to the field of religious and Islamic studies," and concludes: "I recommend this work most highly." The author of those words? Khaleel Mohammed.

Here now is this week's installment of the Blogging the Qur'an series, which discusses in full the notorious incident of Muhammad's marriage to his former daughter-in-law Zaynab -- which, far from being a "shameless lie," is a well-known and much-discussed element of Islamic tradition.

During the Battle of the Trench, Muhammad's trust in Allah when things looked bleak for the Muslims stood him in good stead. Allah tells the Muslims to imitate him, for in him is "a beautiful pattern" of conduct (v. 21). This is the foundation of Muhammad's singular position in Islam as the supreme example for behavior. Muqtedar Khan of the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy explains:

No religious leader has as much influence on his followers as does Muhammad (Peace be upon him) the last Prophet of Islam....And Muhammad as the final messenger of God enjoys preeminence when it comes to revelation – the Qur'an – and traditions. So much so that the words, deeds and silences (that which he saw and did not forbid) of Muhammad became an independent source of Islamic law. Muslims, as a part of religious observance, not only obey, but also seek to emulate and imitate their Prophet in every aspect of life. Thus Muhammad is the medium as well as a source of the divine law.

Allah sometimes seem anxious to grant his prophet his heart's desires. In verses 28-35 Allah addresses Muhammad's wives, enjoining upon them modesty and piety; then verses 36-37 refer obliquely to one of the most notorious incidents of Muhammad's prophetic career. Zaynab bint Jahsh had been married to Muhammad's adopted son Zayd bin Haritha. According to the Tafsir al-Jalalayn, Muhammad asked for Zaynab's hand on behalf of Zayd; Zaynab and her brother "were loathe" to agree, "for they had thought that the Prophet (s) wanted to marry her himself." But they ultimately agreed because of the admonition that "it is not fitting for a Believer, man or woman, when a matter has been decided by Allah and His Messenger to have any option about their

decision: if any one disobeys Allah and His Messenger, he is indeed on a clearly wrong Path” (v. 36).

The Tafsir al-Jalalayn says that Muhammad “caught sight” of Zaynab “and felt love for her,” while Zayd “lost his affection for her” and told Muhammad, “I want to part with her.” But Muhammad told him: “Keep thy wife to thyself, and fear Allah” (v. 37). Aisha later remarked, “If Allah’s Apostle were to conceal anything (of the Quran) he would have concealed this Verse” – because it shows him unwilling to accept Allah’s will, which was that he marry Zaynab. Then one day, according to Tabari, an esteemed, if not the most esteemed, historian and expositor of the Qur’an, Muhammad went to Zayd’s house and found her wearing only a chemise. Muhammad hastened away, murmuring, “Glory be to God the Almighty! Glory be to God, who causes hearts to turn!”

Soon afterward, according to Tabari, Muhammad was talking with Aisha when “a fainting overcame him.” Then he smiled and asked, “Who will go to Zaynab to tell her the good news, saying that God has married her to me?” He then recited the revelation Allah had just given him, scolding him for being concerned about what people might think and thus refusing to marry Zaynab (v. 37). The Tafsir al-Jalalayn explains what Allah is telling Muhammad here: “But you had hidden in your heart what God was to disclose, [what] He was to manifest of your love for her and of [the fact] that should Zayd part with her you would marry her, and you feared people, would say, ‘He has married his son’s wife!’, though God is worthier that you should fear Him, in all things, so take her in marriage and do not be concerned with what people say.”

According to Tabari, Aisha said: “I became very uneasy because of what we heard about her beauty and another thing, the greatest and loftiest of matters—what God had done for her by giving her in marriage. I said that she would boast of it over us.” Zaynab did, saying to Muhammad’s other wives: “You were given in marriage by your families, while I was married (to the Prophet) by Allah from over seven Heavens.”

Verses 38-48 continue defending Muhammad. Muhammad cannot be criticized for doing what Allah has given him as a duty (v. 38). Muhammad is the seal of the prophets (v. 40); as he himself explained, “Messengership and Prophethood have come to an end, and there will be no more Messengers or Prophets.” Muhammad is a witness, a bearer of good news, and a warner (v. 45), and should not obey the unbelievers (v. 48) – such as those who say he did wrong in marrying Zaynab. Then follow (verses 49-52) regulations concerning marriage. A man may divorce a woman before consummating the marriage (v. 49). Muhammad may marry women who offer themselves to him; believers do not share this privilege (v. 50). ‘Ikrimah explained: “This means, it is not permissible for anyone else to marry a woman who offers herself to him; if a woman offers herself to a man, it is not permissible for him (to marry her) unless he gives her something.” Muhammad may go to his wives in any order he chooses, and may postpone the turn of any of them if he wishes (v. 51). When this verse was revealed, Aisha said acidly to Muhammad: “I feel that your Lord hastens in fulfilling your wishes and desires.”

Verses 53-59 reinforce Muhammad’s exalted position. Allah tells believers to be circumspect about barging into Muhammad’s house or staying there too long after dinner, for such behavior “annoys the Prophet”; they should also only speak to his wives from behind screens (v. 53). Allah and his angels bless Muhammad, and the believers should also (v. 56), while those who annoy him are cursed in this world and the next (v. 57). It is also a serious sin to annoy the believers (v. 58). Muhammad’s wives and daughters should cover themselves when in public (v. 59).

Verses 60-73 return to familiar themes. Allah has cursed the hypocrites (v. 61) and unbelievers (v. 64). Men scornfully ask when the Day of Judgment will come (v. 63); in hell they will regret that they disobeyed Muhammad (v. 66) and will ask Allah to give their leaders a double penalty (v. 68).

The believers should not be like those who insulted Moses (v. 69). Ibn Kathir explains that Moses “was a shy and modest man who would never show anything of his skin because of his shyness,” which led some of Jews to claim: “He only keeps himself covered because of some defect in his skin, either leprosy or scrotal hernia or some other defect.” So Allah, wanting to clear Moses, did so one day when Moses “was alone, so he took off his garment and put it on a rock, then he took a bath. When he had finished, he turned back to pick up his garment, but the rock moved away, taking his garment with it.” Moses chased the rock “until he reached a group of the Children of Israel, who saw him naked and found that he was the best of those whom Allah had created. Thus he was cleared of what they had said about him.”

Allah offered the al-amanah, the obedience of created things, to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused it. Man took it, but performed badly – so now Allah must punish the hypocrites and unbelievers (vv. 72-73).

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 34, "Sheba," and Sura 35, "The Angels"

Sura 34 dates from the Meccan period, during a time when, according to Maududi, "the Islamic movement was being suppressed...by resort to derision and ridicule, rumor mongering, false allegations and casting of evil suggestions in the people's minds." It is noteworthy how large such incidents loom in Islamic sacred history, and helps illuminate the furious reaction some modern-day Muslims have had to mild ridicule in the form of political cartoons. In any case, objections to Muhammad's message are repeated, each introduced by the phrase "the unbelievers say," in verses 3, 7, 29, 31, and 43, and Allah at each point answers them.

Verses 1-9 warn the unbelievers of Allah's omniscience and the coming Judgment. Given the universal Islamic teaching that Allah is the sole speaker throughout the Qur'an, v. 1 may seem jarring, what with Allah saying, "Praise be to Allah." Such a phrase would be much more natural in the mouth of Muhammad – but having Muhammad speak would be inconsistent with the idea that the Qur'an is the perfect word of Allah that existed forever with him. In any case, this has never posed any difficulty for Islamic exegetes. Ibn Kathir is typical in ignoring the difficulty and glossing the verse as meaning that "Allah tells us that all praise belongs to Him alone in this world and in the Hereafter."

In any case, despite Allah's knowledge of everything (v. 2), the unbelievers deny that the Hour of Judgment will ever come (v. 3). Allah tells Muhammad to swear "by my Lord" that it will indeed come – as he does also in two other places: 10:53 and 64:7. Those who work against Allah's signs (ayat, the word that is also used for verses of the Qur'an) will be painfully punished (v. 5).

These unbelievers ridicule the idea of a physical resurrection (v. 7) and ask if Muhammad is inventing lies about Allah (v. 8). Allah responds by saying that those who disbelieve in the afterlife are the ones who are wrong (v. 8), and that the fact that he can destroy the earth is a sign from Allah for the believers (v. 9).

Verses 10-21 invoke David (vv. 10-11), Solomon (vv. 12-14), and the people of Sheba (vv. 15-21). Allah orders the mountains and birds to join David in singing Allah's praises (v. 10): Ibn Kathir says that Allah had blessed David "with a mighty voice. Such that when he glorified Allah, the firm, solid, high mountains joined him in glorifying Allah, and the free-roaming birds, who go out in the morning and come back in the evening, stopped for him, and he was able to speak all languages." Then follows a list of Allah's blessings to Solomon (vv. 12-14). The people of Sheba were also blessed with two bountiful gardens (v. 15), but when they rejected Allah, he turned the gardens' fruit bitter (v. 16). Allah never does such things except to the ungrateful (v. 17) – a verse that strongly supports the commonly held idea in the Islamic world that piety in Islam will equal earthly success, and rejecting Allah will bring disaster in this world as well as in the next. Said Mujahid: "He does not punish anyone except the disbelievers."

In verses 22-31 Allah tells Muhammad various things to say to the unbelievers: their idols are powerless (v. 22); no one will intercede for them on the Day of Judgment (v. 23). In v. 25, according to Ibn Kathir, Muhammad is instructed to disown the unbelievers, "saying, 'you do not belong to us and we do not belong to you, because we call people to Allah, to believe that He is the Only God and to worship Him alone. If you respond, then you will belong to us and we to you, but if you reject our call, then we have nothing to do with you and you have nothing to do with us.'" Allah will ultimately judge between the believers and the unbelievers (v. 26). Muhammad is a universal messenger (v. 27); the Indian Qur'an commentator Maulana Bulandshahri records a hadith in which Muhammad says, "By Allah! The person, be he a Jew or a Christian, who does not believe in me after hearing of me shall be of the inmates of hell."

Verses 32-54 continue these themes: the arrogant reject Muhammad's message, but they will believe when they taste Allah's punishment (v. 33); wealth holds people back from following Allah (vv. 34-37); but Allah decides who is wealthy and who isn't (v. 39); the angels will disavow those who worshipped them (vv. 40-41); Muhammad seeks no reward from men, but only from Allah (v. 47).

Sura 35 is also Meccan, and repeats many familiar themes. Says Maududi: "The discourse is meant to warn and reprove the people of Makkah [Mecca] and their chiefs for their antagonistic attitude that they had then adopted towards the Holy Prophet's message of Tauhid [the unity of Allah]." It also starts with the curious "Praise be to Allah" (v. 1). In it, Allah affirms his omnipotence (vv. 1-3) and tells Muhammad that if he is rejected, so were the earlier prophets (v. 4). Men should not be deceived by this present life (v. 5) or by Satan (v. 6); the unbelievers will suffer terrible punishment (v. 7); the believers and unbelievers are not equal, "for Allah leaves to stray whom He wills, and guides whom He wills," so Muhammad shouldn't waste his time grieving over the unbelievers. (v. 8).

Verses 9-17 and 27-28 detail Allah's power as manifest in the natural world, in contrast to the powerlessness of the idols (vv. 13-14). Verses 18-22 stress the sharp contrast between believers and unbelievers. No one can bear another's burdens; everyone must come to Allah individually (v. 18).

Verses 23-26 are addressed to Muhammad, and he is reminded that he is only to warn the people of Allah's punishment (v. 23); if they reject him, they rejected also the earlier prophets (v. 25). Verses 29-35 promise bountiful rewards to the righteous, and verses 36-37 return once again to the torments of hell, when the damned will cry to Allah for help and he will remind them that he sent them a messenger to warn them (v. 37).

Verses 38-45 conclude the sura with more warnings. The Muslims are "inheritors in the earth," so those who reject Allah are simply cheating themselves (v. 39). Those whom people worship besides Allah are powerless, and don't even have a book (as does Muhammad) (v. 40). The arrogant should travel through the earth and see how those who rejected Allah in earlier generations were destroyed (v. 44). Yet even so, Allah doesn't punish men as they deserve (v. 45).

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 36, "Ya Sin"

Sura 36, "Ya Sin," is a Meccan sura that takes its name from the two Arabic letters that begin it (v. 1) – and as with all the chapters that begin with such letters, in the words of the Tafsir al-Jalalayn, "God knows best what He means by these." Muhammad said: "Whoever recites Ya Sin in the night, seeking the Face of Allah, will be forgiven," and "Surah Ya Sin is the heart of the Qur'an." Maududi explains that this because it "presents the message of the Qur'an in a most forceful manner, which breaks the inertness and stirs the spirit of man to action."

Muhammad also said that "Reciting Ya-Sin at the beginning of the day makes the rest of the day easy for the person till night approaches. Also, reciting it with the approach of the night makes the rest of the night easy till the next day." He directed his followers to "recite Surah Ya Sin to the dying ones among you." This should be done, says Maududi, "not only to revive and refresh the whole Islamic creed in the mind of the dying person but also bring before him, in particular, a complete picture of the Hereafter so that he may know what stages he would have to pass through after crossing the stage of this worldly life." And indeed, this sura does indeed "revive and refresh the whole Islamic creed," as it sounds a goodly number of the same themes that we have seen in many other suras.

Allah swears by the Qur'an (v. 2) – that is, according to the Tafsir al-Jalalayn, "the "Definitive Qur'an, made definitive by its marvellous arrangement and unique meanings." The deity addresses Muhammad in verses 2-12, reassuring him that he is indeed one of the prophets (v. 3), sent to warn a people who had not been warned before (v. 6) – that people is, says Ibn Kathir, "the Arabs, for no warner had come to them before him." However, he adds, "the fact that they alone are mentioned does not mean that others are excluded," and "the mission of the Prophet is universal." And once again denying that human beings have free will even when it comes to belief or unbelief and avoiding hellfire, Allah says he has set barriers around the unbelievers so that they "cannot see," (v. 9); the Tafsir al-Jalalayn says that this depicts "the way in which the paths of faith are closed to them." The Tanwîr al-Miqbâs min Tafsîr Ibn 'Abbâs agrees, saying that this verse means that Allah has "covered the insight of their hearts (so that they see not) the Truth and guidance." Abdur-Rahman bin Zayd bin Aslam also concurs: "Allah placed this barrier between them and Islam and Iman [faith], so that they will never reach it." Ibn Kathir paraphrases this passage as "We [i.e., Allah] have blinded their eyes to the truth." So whether Muhammad warns them or not, they will continue in unbelief (v. 10) – as Ibn Kathir says: "Allah has decreed that they will be misguided, so warning them will not help them and will not have any effect on them." Thus only believers will benefit from Muhammad's warning (v. 11).

Then verses 13-29 recapitulate in the form of a parable the story that has been told many times before in the Qur'an, in connection with specific prophets: messengers come to a city (identified as Antioch by many Muslim commentators), but the people reject them, saying they're only "men like ourselves" (v. 15) – as those who rejected Noah said about him (11:27; 23:24). And of course, Muhammad is also just an ordinary man (18:110). They respond by saying that their "duty is only to proclaim the clear Message" (v. 17) – just as is Muhammad's (5:92; 5:99). Another man then comes up to warn the people, and is rewarded with Paradise, whereupon this messenger, enjoying Paradise, wishes that people knew what he knows (v. 26).

Verses 30-46 repeats warnings to the unbelievers. Mankind rejects and mocks Allah's messengers (v. 30); don't they see how many people Allah has destroyed (v. 31)? Everyone will face the judgment (v. 32); they don't see the signs of Allah's power in the natural world (vv. 33-42). One of these signs is that the sun runs its fixed course daily, but only "for a period determined for him" (v. 38). About this Muhammad explained that at sunset, the sun "goes (i.e. travels) till it prostrates itself underneath the Throne and takes the permission to rise again, and it is permitted and then (a time

will come when) it will be about to prostrate itself but its prostration will not be accepted, and it will ask permission to go on its course but it will not be permitted, but it will be ordered to return whence it has come and so it will rise in the west. And that is the interpretation of the Statement of Allah: ‘And the sun runs its fixed course for a term (decreed)’ [v. 38].”

Allah could drown the unbelievers and no one would be able to help them (v. 43). Verses 47-54 repeat some of the scornful remarks of the unbelievers: they don’t need to feed the poor, because Allah would have fed them if he had so willed (v. 47), and they ask Muhammad when the Day of Judgment will come (v. 48). But once it comes upon them, they will cry out in woe (v. 52). But the believers, in verses 55-58, will enjoy Paradise, reclining on couches with their wives (v. 56) — the famous virgins appear in the next sura.

In verses 59-64 Allah addresses the unbelievers on the Day of Judgment, telling them to depart from his presence (v. 59) and reminding them that he warned them not to worship Satan (v. 60) and now Satan has led them astray (v. 62) and they must enter hell (vv. 63-64). In verses 65-68 Allah discusses the unbelievers: on the dreadful Day they will be unable to speak (v. 65), and he could have blotted out their eyes (v. 66). Ibn Abbas paraphrases this as “If We willed, We could have misguided them all away from true guidance, so how could they be guided” – which of course Allah says that he does in many places in the Qur’an (including, but not limited to 7:179; 10:99-100; 16:37; 32:13).

In verses 69-83 Allah emphasizes the miraculous nature of the Qur’an (vv. 69-70); the signs in the natural world (vv. 71-73; 77-81); and the powerlessness of the idols (vv. 74-75). He tells Muhammad not to let the unbelievers get him down (v. 76), as he does also in 3:176; 15:88; 26:3; and 31:23. For Allah has power over all things (vv. 82-83).

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 37, "The Ranks"

"The Messenger of Allah," said `Abdullah bin `Umar, "used to command us to make our prayers short and he used to recite As-Saffat ["The Ranks," i.e., this sura] when he led us in prayer." This Meccan sura begins (verses 1-11) with a heavenly vision: the angels "ranged about in ranks" (v. 1), repelling evil (v. 2) and thus proclaiming Allah's message (v. 3). That message, of course, is that Allah is one (v. 4) and is Lord of all (v. 5).

The angels are apparently ranged in ranks in order to keep the rebellious demons from listening in to the Exalted Assembly (vv. 7-8) – that is, says Ibn Kathir, "they cannot reach the higher group — which refers to the heavens and the angels in them — when they speak of what has been revealed by Allah of His Laws and decrees." Some devils, however, do manage to hear and snatch away a bit of Allah's revelation (v. 10); Ibn Abbas explains that "when they heard the revelation, they would come down to earth and to every word they would add nine of their own." This may be the cosmic derivation of the Scriptural corruptions that the Jews (5:13) and the Christians (5:14) engaged in.

Verses 12-39 return to the very familiar themes of the scorn of the unbelievers for Muhammad's message, which they dismiss again as "mere magic" (v. 15) while they dismiss the messenger himself as a "poet possessed" (v. 36). They again deny the resurrection of the dead (vv. 16-17). They will accuse each other of leading them all astray as they realize that Allah's word was true (vv. 28-32). For Muhammad's message is true and confirms the messages of the earlier prophets (v. 37) – a statement which, as we have seen, requires the idea that the earlier prophets who are listed in the Qur'an, including Biblical figures such as Abraham, Moses, Jesus, etc., taught Islam — until their messages were corrupted by their venal followers.

Then verses 40-49 turn to the blessed in Paradise. They will drink from a "clear-flowing fountain" (v. 45), which will, says the Tafsir al-Jalalayn, be filled with "wine that flows along the ground like streams of water, white, whiter than milk, delicious to the drinkers, in contrast to the wine of this world which is distasteful to drink." Ibn Kathir adds that "Zayd bin Aslam said, 'White flowing wine,' meaning, with a bright, shining color, unlike the wine of this earth with its ugly, repulsive colors of red, black, yellow and turbid shades, and other features which are repugnant to anyone of a sound nature." This wine won't even cause drunkenness (v. 47). They will also enjoy the company of chaste, beautiful women (v. 48), like "eggs closely guarded" (v. 49) – that is, according to the Tafsir al-Jalalayn, "in terms of [the starkness of their white] colour, hidden eggs, of ostriches, sheltered by their feathers from dust, the colour being that whiteness with a hint of pallor, which is the most beautiful of female complexions." These are the fabled virgins of Paradise, in search of whom Muslims have fought against unbelievers and sought death throughout history, knowing that Paradise is guaranteed to those who "kill and are killed" for Allah (9:111).

In verses 50-59 one of the blessed will turn to another in Paradise and start telling him about his friend who scoffed at Islam (vv. 51-53). Then a voice will direct him to look down and see his old friend suffering in hellfire, whereupon he will chastise him for almost getting him sent to hell also (vv. 54-59). Verses 60-73 dwell on the torments of the damned. At the heart of hell they will find the Zaqquq tree, with its fruit like devils' heads (v. 65), and they will drink boiling water (v. 67). Allah sent messengers to the people who were ultimately damned (v. 72), but they did not heed (v. 73). Verses 74-148 then hail Allah's believing servants: Noah (vv. 75-82); Abraham (vv. 83-111); Isaac (vv. 112-113); Moses and Aaron (vv. 114-122); Elijah (vv. 123-132); Lot (vv. 133-138); Jonah (vv. 139-148).

Abraham sees in a dream that he must sacrifice his son (v. 102) but Allah stops him just before he is about to do it (vv. 104-105); it was all a test (v. 106). The son is not named in the Qur'anic text, but Isaac's birth follows (v. 112), which strongly implies that he was Ishmael. Ibn Kathir explains the

view of virtually all Islamic scholars: the sacrificial son was Ishmael, and the Jews and Christians corrupted the text of their Scriptures to make the claim that he was Isaac:

According to their Book, Allah commanded Ibrahim to sacrifice his only son, and in another text it says his firstborn son. But here they falsely inserted the name of Ishaq [Isaac]. This is not right because it goes against what their own Scripture says. They inserted the name of Ishaq because he is their ancestor, while Isma'il is the ancestor of the Arabs. They were jealous of them, so they added this idea and changed the meaning of the phrase 'only son' to mean 'the only son who is with you,' because Isma'il had been taken with his mother to Makkah [Mecca]. But this is a case of falsification and distortion, because the words 'only son' cannot be said except in the case of one who has no other son. Furthermore, the firstborn son has a special status that is not shared by subsequent children, so the command to sacrifice him is a more exquisite test.

As in the Bible, Jonah is swallowed by the big fish (v. 142). He is spat out onto a shore (v. 145), preaches to a hundred thousand people (v. 147), and they believe, whereupon Allah "permitted them to enjoy their life for a while" (v. 148). In the Bible, they "repent," but here, they "believe" – which is the all-important act in the Qur'an, that of accepting the message.

The story of Jonah then segues neatly in verses 149-182 into a polemic against the pagan Arabs who worshipped "daughters of Allah." Allah instructs his prophet to ask them if they really think that Allah has daughters while they themselves have sons (v. 149) – because everyone knows, of course, that sons are superior to daughters, and so this would be attributing an inferiority to Allah. Those who say Allah has begotten children are liars (v. 152). Those who claim otherwise should produce their proof from Scripture (v. 157). In reality those whom people worship besides Allah are powerless (vv. 161-163). But those ranged in ranks (whose return is a nice bit of poetic rounding) declare Allah's glory (vv. 164-166). Allah's forces will be victorious (v. 173) – as the Tafsir al-Jalalayn explains: "assuredly Our hosts, namely, the believers, they will indeed be the victors, over the disbelievers by [their being given] the definitive proofs and assistance against them in this world. And if some of these [believers] are not victorious over them in this world, then assuredly in the Hereafter [they will be so]."

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 38, "Sad"

This Meccan sura takes its name from the Arabic letter sad, with which it begins. As always, the letters that begin many suras are left unexplained, and the commentators say that Allah alone knows what he means by these letters. Then verses 1-16 once again excoriate the unbelievers for their scorn and rejection of Muhammad's message. Allah quotes the unbelievers' objections; they ask, "Has he" – that is, Muhammad – "made the gods (all) into one Allah?" (v. 5). The question reflects their puzzlement over Muhammad's assertion that pre-Islamic pagan gods such as Al-Rahman ("The Merciful") were in reality simply attributes of the one true God. Some historians believe that Muhammad actually enjoined worship of Al-Rahman only for some time, later replacing that name with the name "Allah" – "the God" — and calling al-Rahman one characteristic of Allah.

The scoffers also complain that they never heard the like of Muhammad's teaching "among the people of these latter days" (v. 7) – that is, according to Ibn 'Abbas, "We have not heard of this from the religion of these later days (meaning Christianity); if this Qur'an were true, the Christians would have told us about it." But they have not yet tasted Allah's punishment (v. 8), and they will ultimately be put to flight (v. 11). In sum, as Maududi puts it, "Allah says that the actual reason with those people for their denial is not any defect in the message of Islam but their own arrogance, jealousy and insistence on following the blind." This is a very common stance toward nonbelievers to this day among serious Muslims: the idea that one may reject Islam in good faith is difficult for them to accept, as it is so decisively rejected in the Qur'an. Those who rejected the earlier prophets were all punished (v. 14) — and so will be those who reject Muhammad.

Verses 17-29 turn to David, retelling the parable that the prophet Nathan tells the King in 2 Samuel 12:1-9. In the Bible, the point of the story of the rich man with many ewes who takes the single ewe of the poor man is to bring home to David the enormity of his having had Uriah the Hittite killed so that he could take Uriah's wife Bathsheba. In the Qur'an is none of this, however, except the story of the rich man who took the poor man's ewe, followed by David's realization that Allah had tried him (v. 24). The story clearly depends on the Biblical story of Bathsheba — Ibn Kathir says, "In discussing this passage, the scholars of Tafsir [Qur'an commentary] mention a story which is mostly based upon Isra'iliyat [Israelite] narrations. Nothing has been reported about this from the Infallible Prophet that we could accept as true." The Tafsir al-Jalalayn reveals the dependence in saying: "And David thought, in other words, he became certain, that We had indeed tried him, that We had caused him to fall into a trial, that is, a test, through his love for that woman. So he sought forgiveness of his Lord and fell down bowing, in other words, prostrate, and repented."

Then follow, in verses 30-40, an account of David's son Solomon. Regarding Solomon's horses (v. 31), Ibn Kathir recounts an incident in which Muhammad happened upon one of the toys of his child bride, Aisha: a horse with cloth wings. He asked her, "Did you not hear that Sulayman, peace be upon him, had a horse that had wings?" – and then, says Aisha, "the Messenger of Allah smiled so broadly that I could see his molars." Embarrassed by their implications, Islamic apologists in the West often deny the Islamic traditions that specify that Aisha was nine when Muhammad (the man they hold up as the supreme example of human conduct) consummated his marriage with her. They say that Aisha was actually 19 when she married Muhammad – but they do not explain why a young woman in her twenties would still be playing with toys, as in the story of her winged horse.

Allah says that he placed on Solomon's throne a "lifeless body" (v. 34); the Tafsir al-Jalalayn explains that this was a "jinn, disguised as Solomon," and that the incident was part of Allah's punishment of Solomon "because he had married a woman [solely] out of his desire for her." The jinn impersonated Solomon and fooled the birds and others with whom Solomon used to converse, frustrating him. But after Solomon asks for Allah's forgiveness (v. 35), Allah subjects even the winds to his power (v. 36).

Verses 41-48 again goes through the roster of the prophets: Job (vv. 41-44); Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (vv. 45-47); and Ishmael, Elisha, and Dhul-Kifl, who is sometimes identified with Ezekiel (v. 48). Allah tells Job to strike his wife with a handful of grass (v. 44); according to al-Qurtubi, this was because while Job was afflicted, Satan told his wife “a word of disbelief,” which she then told Job. Job was angry, and vowed to give her one hundred lashes; Allah ordered him to fulfill his oath by striking her with this bundle of grass.

The in verses 49-54 Allah again describes the pleasures of Paradise, followed in verses 55-64 with the pains of Hell. The “chaste women” of Paradise will be of “equal age” (v. 52), which the Tafsir al-Jalalayn explains as meaning that they will be “girls who are thirty three years of age.” Meanwhile, the damned will be forced to drink both “a boiling fluid, and a fluid dark, murky, intensely cold!” (v. 57). Those who followed the “misleaders” into Hell will reproach them (v. 60) and the leaders and followers will engage in mutual recriminations (v. 64).

Allah tells Muhammad what to say to the unbelievers (verses 65-70): he is just a warner, and Allah is the only God (vv. 65, 70) and he has no knowledge of what the “Highest Chiefs” say (v. 69) – which seems to be a reference to the Exalted Assembly of Allah and his angels (37:7-8).

Verses 71-85 return to the story of the creation of mankind and Satan’s refusal to bow down to Adam, which we have seen before in 2:30-39; 7:11-25; and 15:28-42. It is, of course, a vestige of the Biblical idea that human beings are created in the image of God. But Satan won’t prostrate himself before Adam because, he tells Allah, “I am better than he: thou createdst me from fire, and him thou createdst from clay” (v. 76). Allah thereupon curses him (vv. 77-78), but then Satan asks for and receives a reprieve until the Day of Judgment (vv. 79-81) and vows to lead astray all mankind except Allah’s “single-minded slaves” (v. 83). Allah then vows to fill Hell with Satan’s followers (v. 85).

The sura ends with Allah telling Muhammad to warn the unbelievers that they will all see the truth of his message “after awhile” (v. 88).

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 39, "Throngs"

According to Muhammad's favorite wife, Aisha, "The Messenger of Allah used to fast until we would say, 'He does not want to break fast,' and he would not fast until we would say, 'He does not want to fast.' And he used to recite Bani Isra'il [Al-Isra'] and Az-Zumar every night" – that is, suras 17 and 39.

Sura 39 once again emphasizes the evil of worshipping others alongside Allah, and castigates the unbelievers for doing so. It takes its title from verses 71 and 73 — the "throngs" in question are the unbelievers crowding into hell and the believers crowding into Paradise. The recurring theme of this sura is that those whom the unbelievers worship are worthless – they can't help those who pray to them, and in the end those who relied on them will regret it. This is a Meccan sura that was revealed fairly early in Muhammad's career. According to the Ruhul Ma'ani, it was revealed around the time that a group of Muslims left Arabia and sought refuge in Abyssinia, to escape persecution from the pagan Quraysh tribe.

Verses 1-29 repeat many familiar themes. Allah repeats that he revealed the Qur'an (vv. 1-2). Then he dismisses the core assumption involved in the intercession of the saints – that they bring one closer to God (v. 3) — with greater precision and accuracy than he demonstrated in his dismissal of the idea of the Trinity (5:116). If Allah wanted a son, he could have chosen one from those he created, but he is above that (v. 4). The workings of the natural world show his presence and power (vv. 5-6, 21). Allah does not need human beings, but he dislikes ingratitude (v. 7). When men are in trouble they pray, but in good times they forget him and worship others along with him – such people are headed for hell (v. 8).

The believer and the unbeliever are not equal (vv. 9, 22, 24). This oft-repeated notion has many implications; the emphasis in this sura is on the fact that they will not receive equal treatment on the Day of Judgment. At the same time, however, the absolute way in which the statement is made underscores the idea that the Muslims are the "best of people" (3:110) and the unbelievers are the "vilest of created beings" (98:6). There is no compatibility of this with the idea of the equality of dignity of all people as created by the same God. Instead, there is a sharp dichotomy between believer and unbeliever that runs through all of Islam – including its laws for the governance of states. In light of this, it should come as no surprise to anyone that there is not a single Muslim-majority state in the world today, even though Islamic law is not fully enforced in almost all of them, where non-Muslims enjoy absolute legal equality with Muslims. Even in secular Turkey there are restrictions on conversion from Islam to another religion, and immense amounts of red tape involved in trying to get official permission to build a church. This is no accident: it is a cultural hangover of the deeply ingrained traditional idea that non-Muslims in a state that Muslims control should "feel themselves subdued" (9:29), in accordance with the dictum that they are not equal to the believers, and should be made in every possible way to remember their perversity in rejecting Islam.

Allah tells Muhammad a series of things he should say to the unbelievers, emphasizing that he is simply Allah's messenger and would face his wrath as they will if he disobeyed him (v. 13). Allah tells Muhammad to say, "And I am commanded to be the first of those who are Muslims" (v. 12) – which would seem to contradict the Qur'an's (chronologically) later claim that Abraham was a Muslim (3:67), as were the other prophets. However, Islamic exegetes smooth over the contradiction by saying that this refers to Muhammad's community specifically, not to the earlier communities of believers. "The Ummah [community] of the Holy Prophet," explains Maulana Bulandshahri, "is the last Ummah to appear on earth. The first believer of this Ummah was none other than the Holy Prophet himself."

Then Allah contrasts the fates of the believers (Paradise) and the unbelievers (Hell) (vv. 16-20). He says that the Qur'an is "the most beautiful Message in the form of a Book, consistent with itself, (yet) repeating (its teaching in various aspects)" (v. 23). Mujahid explained: "This means that the entire Qur'an's parts resemble each other and are oft-repeated" – and of course, truer words were never spoken. The Qur'an contains numerous parables, by way of warning (v. 27). It is in Arabic, with no crookedness (v. 28) – that is, says the Tafsir al-Jalalayn, no "contradiction or variance."

Verses 30-52 again warns about the Day of Judgment. The unbelievers threaten Muhammad with punishment by their false idols – and here again Allah repeats that "he whom Allah sendeth astray, for him there is no guide" (v. 36). The unbelievers are perverse and self-contradictory, acknowledging that Allah created all things but still calling on their false gods (v. 38). There is an odd statement in v. 42: "those on whom He has passed the decree of death, He keeps back (from returning to life), but the rest He sends (to their bodies) for a term appointed verily in this are Signs for those who reflect." Qur'an translator Abdullah Yusuf Ali explains this by asserting that sleep is a little death: "Sleep being twin-brother to Death, our souls are for the time being released from the bondage of the flesh. Allah takes them for the time being. If, as some do, we are to die peacefully in sleep, our soul does not come back to the physical body, and the later decays and dies. If we still have some period of life to fulfill according to Allah's decree, our soul comes back to the body, and we resume our function in this life."

The idea that anyone can intercede for anyone else before Allah is again rejected (vv. 43-44) and the perversity of the unbelievers again emphasized: when they hear of Allah, their hearts are "filled with disgust and horror," but they hear about their idols with joy (v. 45). On the Day of Judgment the evil deeds of the unbelievers will overtake them (v. 51).

In verses 53-60 Allah again tells Muhammad a series of warnings to say to the unbelievers, telling them to turn to Allah before it's too late. Then verses 61-75 conclude the sura with more warnings of the Day of Judgment, when "the unbelievers will enter Hell in throngs," and will again be reminded of the messengers they did not heed (v. 71), while the believers enter Paradise in throngs (v. 73) — the final outcome of their inequality.

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 40, "The Forgiver"

"Everything has an essence," [said Ibn Abbas](#), "and the essence of the Qur'an is the family of Ha Mim" – that is, suras [40](#) through [46](#), all of which begin with the Arabic letters *ha* and *mim*. (As always, the Muslim commentators say that "only Allah knows" the meaning of these apparently random letters that begin many of the chapters of the Qur'an.) Of the Ha Mim suras Ibn Mas'ud added: "When I reach the family of Ha Mim, it is like reaching a beautiful garden, so I take my time." These are all Meccan suras, and they share the general characteristics of the chapters of that period: furious denunciations of the unbelievers, but none of the exhortations to warfare against them that mark the Medinan suras, and fewer specific denunciations of the Jews and Christians than appear in the chronologically later chapters.

The first of these, [Sura 40](#), is known as "The Believers," from [v. 28](#), but since this is the same title as that of sura 23, it is also known as "The Forgiver," from [v. 3](#). Early Islamic authorities generally asserted that it was revealed to Muhammad right after [sura 39](#), and it shares many of the themes of that sura. [Verses 1-22](#) retail many of these: the Qur'an is from Allah ([v. 2](#)); there is no other god ([v. 3](#)); only unbelievers dispute his signs ([v. 4](#)), such as the people of Noah, whom Allah punished ([v. 5](#)) – they and other unbelievers are "Companions of the Fire" ([v. 6](#)).

The angels pray for the believers around the throne of Allah ([vv. 7-9](#)) and will address the unbelievers in hell, telling them that Allah hates them even more than they hate themselves ([v. 10](#)). [Qatadah explained](#) the mainstream view: "Allah's hatred for the people of misguidance -- when Faith is presented to them in this world, and they turn away from it and refuse to accept it -- is greater than their hatred for themselves when they see the punishment of Allah with their own eyes on the Day of Resurrection." Yet here again the decision as to who is guided to the truth and who remains an unbeliever is entirely up to Allah: no one can guide to the truth those whom Allah leaves to stray ([v. 33](#)) – which means, [explains Ibn Kathir](#), that "whomever Allah sends astray will have no other guide except Him."

[The Tafsir al-Jalalayn explains](#) the unbelievers' question, "Our Lord, You have caused us to die twice, two deaths, and You have given us life twice" ([v. 11](#)): "For they were lifeless drops of semen, then they were given life, then made to die, then brought back to life for the Resurrection." To their question, "Is there then any way to go out" of hell, the two Jalals say that "the answer given to them will be: No!" For they rejected the idea that only Allah was to be worshipped, and associated partners with him ([v. 12](#)). Muhammad should then call on Allah even though the unbelievers hate his doing so ([v. 14](#)), and should warn the unbelievers of the impending Day of Judgment ([vv. 15-18](#)). The unbelievers should travel the earth and see what became of those who refused to worship Allah alone in previous ages – for Allah is strict in punishment ([vv. 21-22, 82-3](#)).

Then [verses 23-55](#) tell the story of Moses and Pharaoh with emphasis on Pharaoh's intention to kill Moses ([v. 26](#)). A believer from among Pharaoh's people asks him: "Will ye slay a man because he says, 'My Lord is Allah?'" ([v. 28](#)). [According to Maududi](#), this sura came to Muhammad when the unbelievers were plotting to kill him, so the parallels are obvious: as we have seen more than once, the Qur'an tells the story of an earlier prophet solely in order to make a point about the reception of Muhammad's message by his contemporaries. And likewise this unnamed believer and contemporary of Moses warns his people that they are risking suffering the fate of those who rejected the earlier prophets ([vv. 31, 34](#)).

Pharaoh in his pride wanted to build a tower "to mount up to the god of Moses" ([vv. 36-7](#)), but ultimately his people were cast into the Fire ([vv. 45-6](#)). In hell the unbelievers will argue with each other over whose fault it was that they ended up there ([vv. 47-48](#)). Here again the unbelievers will ask to be released from hell, but will be refused ([vv. 49-50](#)). Allah promises to make his messengers

victorious ([v. 51](#)); As-Suddi explains: “Allah never sends a Messenger to a people and they kill him or some of the believers who call them to the truth, then that generation passes away, but He then sends them someone who will support their call and will seek vengeance for their blood from those who did that to them in this world. So the Prophets and believers may be killed in this world, but their call will prevail in this world.” And indeed, [Ibn Kathir adds](#), “Allah granted victory to His Prophet Muhammad and his Companions over those who had opposed him, disbelieved in him and shown hostility towards him. He caused His Word and His religion to prevail over all other religions...This religion will continue to prevail until the Hour begins.”

Allah tells Muhammad to be patient, for his promises will prove true (vv. [55](#), [77](#)) – yet again indicating his tremendous solicitude for his prophet. We have seen the centrality of Muhammad in Islam is what led to Muslims being called “Muhammadans” in the West. Muslims universally reject this term as offensive, insisting that they do not worship Muhammad, but the Qur’anic reader, both Muslim and non-Muslim, seeing Allah’s constant concern for his prophet, faces two choices: he can view the repeated Qur’anic statements of Allah’s immense concern for his prophet as an attempt by Muhammad to bolster his stature and privileges as a prophet among his followers, or he can accept the proposition that Muhammad was essentially the most important and divinely beloved human being who ever lived. There doesn’t seem to be any other choice offered.

[Verses 56-85](#) continue excoriating the unbelievers, who are motivated by nothing but pride ([v. 56](#)) – an oft-repeated Qur’anic trope that has led many Muslims through the ages and today to assume that non-Muslims know the truth of Islam but reject it out of selfish self-interest. The believers and unbelievers are not equal ([v. 58](#)) – those who reject Allah’s signs are deluded ([vv. 62-3](#)). The design of the natural world bears witness to Allah’s care for mankind, and his power (vv. [61](#), [64](#), [67](#)). Those who reject Allah will soon know the truth ([v. 70](#)). Those whom people worship besides Allah will fail them ([v. 74](#)). Those who profess faith in Allah after they glimpse his punishments will still be punished ([v. 85](#)).

Blogging the Qur'an: Suras 41, "Explained in Detail," and 42, "Consultation"

According to Muhammad's first biographer, Ibn Ishaq, [Sura 41](#) was revealed to Muhammad after 'Utba bin Rabi'a, a chieftan of the pagan Quraysh, offered Muhammad a series of proposals to "which if he accepts in part, we will give him whatever he wants, and he will leave us in peace."

'Utba approached Muhammad and reminded that he was of the Quraysh tribe (although they had rejected his prophetic claim). "If what you want is money, we will gather for you of our property so that you may be the richest of us; if you want honor, we will make you our chief so that no one can decide anything apart from you; if you want sovereignty, we will make you king, and if this ghost which comes to you, which you see, is such that you cannot get rid of him, we will find a physician for you, and exhaust our means in getting you cured, for often a familiar spirit gets possession of a man until he can be cured of it."

Muhammad replied by reciting [verses 1-37](#) of this sura. Then, Ibn Ishaq recounts, "when 'Utba returned to his companions they noticed that his expression had completely altered, and they asked him what had happened. He said that he had heard words such as he had never heard before, which were neither poetry, spells, nor witchcraft. 'Take my advice and do as I do, leave this man entirely alone for, by God, the words which I have heard will be blazed abroad. If (other) Arabs kill him, others will have rid you of him; if he gets the better of the Arabs, his sovereignty will be your sovereignty, his power your power, and you will be prosperous through him.'"

The other Quraysh chiefs were scornful, saying "He has bewitched you with his tongue." But 'Utba stood his ground, saying only: "You have my opinion, you must do what you think fit."

What so impressed 'Utba was another repetition of many frequently-repeated themes of the Qur'an. The Qur'an is clear and in Arabic ([v. 3](#)) -- which has given rise to the idea that the Qur'an cannot be translated, but is essentially in Arabic, and only its meaning can be rendered in other languages. It gives good news and warning, which most do not heed ([vv. 4-5](#)). Allah tells Muhammad to tell the unbelievers that he is just an ordinary man and that Allah is one, and they should not associate other gods with him ([v. 6](#)). One sign of his presence and power is that Allah created the universe in eight days ([vv. 9-12](#)) – contradicting [7:54](#), [10:3](#), [11:7](#), and [25:59](#), in which he created it in six days.

Allah destroyed the people of 'Ad ([vv. 15-16](#)) and the disbelievers from among the Thamud ([vv. 17-18](#)). Then Allah describes some of the torments of the unbelievers in hell, where even their skins will reproach the unbelievers for their rejection of Islam ([vv. 19-25](#)). The unbelievers try to drown out the recitation of the Qur'an ([v. 26](#)), but they'll get their punishment in hell ([vv. 27-28](#)). The unbelievers in hell will ask Allah to show them who misled them, so they can torment them further ([v. 29](#)). The angels, meanwhile, protect the believers ([vv. 30-32](#)). Goodness and evil cannot be equal ([v. 34](#)); the unbelievers should not prostrate themselves before the sun and moon, but before Allah ([v. 37](#)).

Then [verses 38-54](#) conclude the sura by excoriating the unbelievers for rejecting Islam. They are arrogant ([v. 38](#)), and are known to Allah ([vv. 40-41](#)). The Qur'an is a book of exalted power, containing no falsehood ([vv. 41-42](#)) and containing the same message as previous revelations ([v. 43](#)) – which, as we have seen, leads to the mainstream Muslim idea that the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, because they do not contain the same message as the Qur'an, have been corrupted. If the Qur'an had been revealed in a language other than Arabic, the unbelievers would have complained about that ([v. 44](#)). Allah gave Moses "the Book" (the Torah), but disputes arose about it; "had it not been for a Word that went forth before from thy Lord, their differences would have been settled between them" ([v. 45](#)). [Ibn Kathir says](#) that this means that if Allah had not decreed to "delay the Reckoning until the Day of Resurrection," then "the punishment would have been hastened for

them. But they have an appointed time, beyond which they will find no escape.”

On that day the idols the unbelievers invoke will leave them in the lurch ([v. 48](#)). When Allah makes a man prosper, he forgets that he will one day die and be judged ([v. 50](#)).

Then [Sura 42](#) repeats that Muhammad is inspired, as were the earlier prophets ([v. 3](#)). The Qur'an is sent in Arabic to warn the Mother of Towns (that is, Mecca, so called “because it is nobler than all other lands,” says Ibn Kathir) of the judgment day, of which there is no doubt ([v. 7](#)). If Allah had willed, he could have made mankind a single people, but to some he chooses to extend mercy, while wrongdoers will have no one to help them ([v. 8](#)). Ibn Kathir sees this as more evidence of absolute determinism: Allah could have made human beings “either all following guidance or all following misguidance, but He made them all different, and He guides whomsoever He wills to the truth and He sends astray whomsoever He wills.” [V. 44](#) affirms this again.

Allah will judge all disputes ([v. 10](#)) -- [the Tafsir al-Jalalayn explains](#): “And whatever you may differ, with disbelievers, in, of religion or otherwise, the verdict therein belongs, it will return, to God, on the Day of Resurrection.” Muhammad’s religion is the same as that of Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus ([v. 13](#)), but their followers “became divided only after Knowledge reached them, through selfish envy as between themselves” ([v. 14](#)) – buttressing the Islamic idea that the prophets of Judaism and Jesus must have taught Islam, and their message was corrupted by their followers. Muhammad is to call the people to Islam and to “judge justly” between them ([v. 15](#)). But those who argue about Allah after acknowledging him will be punished ([v. 16](#)) – an attitude which can, of course, be a hindrance to asking questions about the faith. [Verses 17-29](#) continue in this vein, promising Paradise to believers and hell to unbelievers.

Then [v. 30](#) declares that “whatever misfortune happens to you, is because of the things your hands have wrought” – that is, [says Ibn Kathir](#), “because of sins that you have committed in the past.” This leads to the notion that the path to good fortune in this world is more fervent adherence to Allah’s laws – as we see playing out these days in Pakistan and all over the Islamic world.

[Verses 31-39](#) expound upon Allah’s power and the certainty of his judgment. Then [v. 40](#) says that an equal injury should be inflicted in retaliation for an injury – but Allah will reward those who forgive. However, taking revenge is not sinful ([v. 41](#)). Then the sura concludes by reaffirming that the unbelievers will be punished ([v. 45](#)) and will have no protector on the Day of Judgment ([v. 46](#)) and that Muhammad is inspired ([vv. 51-52](#)).

Blogging the Qur'an: Suras 43, "Ornaments of Gold," 44, "Smoke," and 45, "Crouching"

[Maududi says](#) that [sura 43](#) was revealed around the same time as suras [32](#), [40](#) and [42](#), when the pagan Quraysh of Mecca, the tribe from which Muhammad came, was plotting to kill him – he adds that Allah makes a reference to their secret plots in [vv. 79-80](#).

The sura begins with the familiar affirmation of the Arabic character and wisdom of the Qur'an ([v. 3](#)), and notes that "it is in the Mother of the Book, in Our Presence" ([v. 4](#)). The "Mother of the Book" is, according to Islamic tradition, the Preserved Tablet, the copy of the Qur'an that has existed for all eternity with Allah. The Qur'an that Muhammad received through the angel Gabriel over the twenty-three years of his career as a prophet is a perfect copy of this eternal book. Then Allah again excoriates the unbelievers, warning them that the earlier prophets were mocked also ([v. 7](#)), and that he destroyed the mockers ([v. 8](#)).

[Verses 9-12](#) then detail various signs of Allah's power in the natural world, which are all signs for the unbelievers. Then [verses 13-25](#) criticize the unbelievers for blindly following the religion of their fathers ([vv. 23-24](#)) and for suggesting that Allah has daughters, which they themselves are sorry to have ([vv. 16-17](#)). This refers to the goddesses of the Quraysh, which Muhammad himself briefly acknowledged as "daughter of Allah," and then reneged when he realized he had compromised his monotheistic message. This was the notorious "Satanic Verses" incident, which we'll discuss in detail in [sura 53](#). As for this passage: "Women," [explains Ibn Kathir](#), "are regarded as lacking something, which they make up for with jewelry and adornments from the time of childhood onwards, and when there is a dispute, they cannot speak up and defend themselves clearly, so how can this be attributed to Allah?"

Abraham appears briefly ([vv. 26-28](#)) to repeat the warning to unbelievers, and then [verses 29-42](#) detail the ingratitude and self-delusion of the unbelievers: they think they're rightly guided when in fact they're under demonic influence ([vv. 36-37](#)). Allah reassures Muhammad that the Qur'an is true and that he is on the right path ([vv. 43-45](#)). Moses reappears in [verses 46-56](#), with the parallels to Muhammad more transparent than ever: the unbelievers ridicule his signs ([v. 47](#)) and call him a sorcerer ([v. 49](#)); ultimately Allah punished them ([v. 55](#)).

Jesus then follows ([verses 57-65](#)), with affirmations that he was not divine ([v. 59](#)), and that he shall return at the time of Judgment ([v. 61](#)). [In a hadith](#), Muhammad says that at that time Jesus will "break the cross, kill the pigs, and abolish the Jizya tax" that is mandated for Christians under Islamic rule. This means he will destroy Christianity and Islamize the world. Jesus also preached the oneness of Allah ([vv. 63-64](#)), but his followers divided into warring sects ([v. 65](#)). If Allah really had a son, Allah tells Muhammad to say he would be the first to worship him ([v. 81](#)).

[Verses 66-88](#) then rehearse the delights of the Garden of Paradise and the pains of Hell. The unbelievers will plead for it to end, but will be rebuffed ([v. 77](#)). Islam is the truth, but the unbelievers hate the truth ([v. 78](#)). Those whom they worship have no power ([v. 86](#)); Muhammad should turn away from them, for they will know he was right soon enough ([v. 89](#)).

According to Islamic tradition, [sura 44](#) was revealed around the same time as [sura 43](#). It too begins by praising the Qur'an: it "makes things clear" ([v. 2](#)) and began to be sent down during a "Blessed Night" ([v. 3](#)), which was during Ramadan. It was revealed as a sign of Allah's mercy ([vv. 5-6](#)). Then follow warnings of the Day of Judgment, and the warning that people will be enveloped with smoke – a painful punishment ([vv. 10-11](#)). This penalty will be removed for a time, but the people will still not believe ([v. 15](#)). [A hadith explains](#) that Muhammad had asked Allah to curse the Quraysh; [another says](#) that he asked him to give them seven years of famine, "so famine overtook them for

one year and destroyed every kind of life to such an extent that the people started eating hides, carcasses and rotten dead animals. Whenever one of them looked towards the sky, he would (imagine himself to) see smoke because of hunger.” After the chief of the Quraysh appealed to Muhammad that his own kin were dying (the Quraysh were Muhammad’s tribe), Muhammad relented and prayed for them, and Allah revealed [vv. 10-16](#).

Pharaoh reappears in [verses 17-33](#), challenged by a curiously unnamed Moses. Allah chose the Children of Israel above other nations ([v. 32](#)). Islamic commentators minimize the ongoing import of this: [according to Mujahid](#), “This means that they were chosen above those among whom they lived,” and Qatadah agreed: “They were chosen above the other people of their own time, and it was said that in every period there are people who are chosen above others.” [The Tanwîr al-Miqbâs min Tafsîr Ibn ‘Abbâs likewise says](#) that the Israelites were chosen above others “of their time.”

Then [verses 34-59](#) repeat warnings to the unbelievers, recounting their scorn at the idea of the resurrection of the dead ([v. 35](#)); they will be destroyed ([v. 37](#)). In hell the unbelievers will eat of the tree of Zaqqum, which will scald their insides ([vv. 43-46](#)), while the righteous in Paradise will enjoy the company of “fair women with beautiful, big, and lustrous eyes” ([v. 54](#)).

[Sura 45](#) continues in this vein. The Qur’an is from Allah ([v. 2](#)); there are signs for the believers in the heavens and on earth ([vv. 3-6, 12-13](#)). But the unbelievers mock the signs of Allah ([v. 9](#)); hell awaits them ([vv. 10-11](#)). The believers should forgive the unbelievers ([v. 14](#)); however, [Ibn Kathir explains](#) that this was only a temporary provision: “Let the believers forgive the disbelievers and endure the harm that they direct against them. In the beginning of Islam, Muslims were ordered to observe patience in the face of the oppression of the idolaters and the People of the Scriptures so that their hearts may incline towards Islam. However, when the disbelievers persisted in stubbornness, Allah legislated for the believers to fight in Jihad.”

Allah favored the Children of Israel above the nations ([v. 16](#)), but they fell into schisms because of insolent envy ([v. 17](#)). Muhammad is now on the right path ([v. 18](#)), and [Ibn Kathir warns](#) that this passage “contains a warning to the Muslim Ummah as well. It warns them not to take the path the Jews took nor adopt their ways.” The evildoers will not be judged in the same way as are the righteous ([v. 21](#)). Allah has left the one who worships his own desire blind and straying ([v. 23](#)). Then [verses 24-37](#) conclude with more warnings of the Day of Judgment: the unbelievers scoff ([v. 25](#)), but there is no real doubt about the Day ([v. 26](#)). The unbelievers will be reminded that they witnessed Allah’s signs ([v. 31](#)), but they took them in jest, and now will burn forever ([v. 35](#)).

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 46, "The Dunes"

The Meccan [sura 46](#) is the last of the "Ha Mim" series of suras ([40-46](#)), and hews closely to the themes of the others: the Qur'an is revealed by Allah ([v. 2](#)); Allah created the heavens and the earth for a just purpose, but the unbelievers reject faith ([v. 3](#)); those whom they pray to besides Allah are powerless ([vv. 4-5](#)); the unbelievers dismiss the Qur'an as "sorcery" ([v. 7](#)) or forgery.

Allah tells Muhammad to respond to this by noting that Allah would punish him if he were falsely attributing words to Allah that he did not say ([v. 8](#)). Muhammad brings no new message – an implicit affirmation of the Islamic proposition that Islam was the original religion of all the earlier prophets, e.g., Abraham, Moses, Jesus, etc., but their wicked followers corrupted their messages. To support this argument the Qur'an invokes "a witness from among the Children of Israel" who "testifies to its similarity" to the Jewish scriptures ([v. 10](#)).

Islamic tradition recorded by Muhammad's first biographer, Ibn Ishaq, and [the hadith collector Bukhari](#), identifies this as Abdullah bin Salam, a rabbi who was an early convert to Islam. As a rabbi, Abdullah was intrigued by Muhammad, and went to see him. Admitted to Muhammad's presence, he asked him "about three things which nobody knows unless he be a Prophet. What is the first portent of the Hour? What is the first meal of the people of Paradise? And what makes a baby look like its father or mother?"

The Prophet coolly told him, "Just now Jibril (Gabriel) has informed me about that."

Abdullah was surprised. "Gabriel?"

"Yes," said Muhammad.

"He, among the angels is the enemy of the Jews," noted Abdullah, whereupon Muhammad recited a verse of the Qur'an: "Say: Whoever is an enemy to Gabriel—for he brings down the (revelation) to thy heart by Allah's will, a confirmation of what went before, and guidance and glad tidings for those who believe—Whoever is an enemy to Allah and His angels and messengers, to Gabriel and Michael, lo! Allah is an enemy to those who reject Faith" ([2:97](#)).

Then he proceeded to answer Abdullah's three questions:

As for the first portent of the Hour, it will be a fire that will collect the people from the east to west. And as for the first meal of the people of Paradise, it will be the caudite (i.e. extra) lobe of the fish liver. And if a man's discharge preceded that of the woman, then the child resembles the father, and if the woman's discharge preceded that of the man, then the child resembles the mother.

Hearing these answers, Abdullah immediately converted to Islam and excoriated his own people, exclaiming: "I testify that *La ilaha illallah* (none has the right to be worshipped but Allah) and that you are the Messenger of Allah, O Allah's Messenger; the Jews are liars, and if they should come to know that I have embraced Islam, they would accuse me of being a liar."

Abdullah recounted that he "became a Muslim, and when I returned to my house I ordered my family to do the same." He asked for Muhammad's help in laying a trap for the Jews: "The Jews are a nation of liars and I wish you would take me into one of your houses and hide me from them, then ask them about me so that they may tell you the position I hold among them before they know that I have become a Muslim. For if they know it beforehand they will utter slanderous lies against me." Muhammad agreed, summoned the Jewish leaders with Abdullah present but hidden, and asked them what they thought of Abdullah. They replied: "He is our chief, and the son of our chief; our

rabbi, and our learned man.”

Muhammad asked them, “What would you think if ‘Abdullah bin Salam embraced Islam?”

The Jewish leaders answered, “May Allah protect him from this!”

The trap was sprung. Abdullah appeared and cried: “I testify that *La ilaha illallah* (none has the right to be worshipped but Allah) and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah. O Jews, fear God and accept what He has sent you. For by God you know that he is the apostle of God. You will find him described in your Torah and even named. I testify that he is the apostle of God, I believe in him, I hold him to be true, and I acknowledge him.”

But the Jews now said: “Abdullah is the worst of us, and the son of the worst of us.”

Abdullah exclaimed, “O Allah's Messenger! This is what I was afraid of!” He later recounted: “I reminded the apostle that I had said that they would do this, for they were a treacherous, lying, and evil people.”

Such tales would only reinforce for Muslims throughout history the idea that the Jewish (as well as Christian) Scriptures really did bear witness to Muhammad in clear terms. Ibn Sa‘d recounts that Muhammad once went to a Jewish seminary, where he challenged the most learned rabbi: “Do you know that I am the Apostle of Allah?”

The rabbi answered, “By Allah! Yes, and the people know what I know. Verily your attributes and qualities are clearly mentioned in the Torah, but they are jealous of you.” It was only the sinful obstinacy of the Jews and Christians that prevented them from acknowledging this— indeed, that sin was so great that ultimately it led them to alter their Scriptures in order to remove all references to Muhammad. The idea of Jews and Christians as sinful renegades from the truth of Islam would become a cornerstone of Islamic thought regarding non-Muslims.

The Qur’an goes on to say that the unbelievers demean the believers, asserting that if Islam were true, people of such low quality as the believers would not have been the first to accept it ([v. 11](#)). Yet the Qur’an confirms in Arabic the Book of Moses ([v. 12](#)). Those who confess faith in Allah will not grieve, but will enjoy the Gardens of Paradise ([vv. 13-14](#)).

A good Muslim should honor his parents; some unbelieving children, however, rebuke their parents for their Islamic faith – they will be “utterly lost” ([vv. 15-18](#)). The unbelievers have pleasure in this world, but will be in hell in the next ([v. 20](#)). There they will acknowledge the truth of Islam, and pay the penalty for rejecting it ([v. 34](#)). The prophet Hud (see suras [7](#), [11](#), and [26](#)) reappears to underscore this – he warns his people ([v. 21](#)) but they do not heed, and are destroyed ([vv. 24-25](#)). Allah then tells Muhammad that a crowd of jinns listened to him reciting the Qur’an ([v. 29](#)), and went back and warned their fellow jinns that those who do not accept the message are in error and will face the penalty ([v. 32](#)). Allah concludes the sura by telling Muhammad to be patient and persevere in preaching his message; the unbelievers will soon face the divine punishment.

Blogging the Qur'an: Suras 47, "Muhammad," and 48, "Victory"

The Medinan [sura 47](#) is alternatively known as *Al-Qital*, "The Fighting" – and indeed, it is much preoccupied with war against unbelievers. It affirms of those who oppose Islam that Allah will "render their deeds vain" (vv. [1](#), [8-9](#), [28](#), [32](#)). Bulandshahri explains: "Even though the disbelievers may carry out many good deeds and render great services to mankind, these deeds will not be recognized on the Day of Judgment on account of their disbelief." By contrast, Allah will improve the condition of the believers (vv. [2](#), [7](#), [35](#)).

Teachings such as these lead to the common Islamic idea that Islamic purity will lead to worldly prosperity, and unbelief conversely to ruin in this life. For Allah protects the believers, while the unbelievers have no protector ([v. 11](#)). In a hadith in An-Nasai's collection – one of the six collections Muslims consider most reliable – Muhammad prays, "O Allah, I seek refuge with you from unbelief and poverty." Someone asked him, "Are they equal?" Muhammad answered, "Yes." This connection is often clearly refuted by reality, but is tenaciously held nonetheless.

Then come instructions to behead the unbelievers when the believers meet them in battle ([v. 4](#)). The literal understanding of this verse is paramount among Islamic commentators. [Ibn Kathir says](#) that it means that when Muslims "fight against" unbelievers, they should "cut them down totally with your swords." [The Tafsir al-Jalalayn spells it out further](#): "in other words, slay them — reference is made to the 'striking of the necks' because the predominant cause of being slayed is to be struck in the neck." [Zamakhshari takes](#) "strike at the necks" to mean that Muslims should strike non-Muslims specifically on the neck rather than elsewhere, so as to make sure they are dead and not just wounded.

The twentieth-century Qur'an translator Abdullah Yusuf Ali likewise takes the injunction literally, justifying it by saying, "You cannot wage war with kid gloves." However, Muhammad Khatib, a modern Sunni commentator, says that this command applies only to Muhammad's day, although Shi'ites "think it is a universal precept." Modern-day Sunni jihad groups such as Zarqawi's Al-Tawhid wal-Jihad in Iraq a few years ago pointed to this and other Qur'anic verses as justifications for their beheadings.

The same verse goes on to call for the taking of prisoners and allowing for "either generosity or ransom" of prisoners of war. This has been enshrined in Islamic law: *'Umdat al-Salik*, a manual of Islamic jurisprudence certified by Al-Azhar University in Cairo (the most respected authority in Sunni Islam) as conforming "to the practice and faith of the orthodox Sunni community," lays out four options for prisoners, in line with this verse: "When an adult male is taken captive, the caliph considers the interests ... (of Islam and the Muslims) and decides between the prisoner's death, slavery, release without paying anything, or ransoming himself in exchange for money or for a Muslim captive held by the enemy" (o9.14).

Then comes an oft-repeated refrain: Don't the unbelievers travel around the earth and see how Allah has destroyed earlier unbelieving peoples (vv. [10](#), [13](#))? Allah will admit the believers to the gardens of Paradise, while the unbelievers will eat as the cattle eat and drink boiling water that will cut their bowels to pieces (vv. [12](#), [14-15](#)). Some listen to Muhammad but are insincere ([v. 16](#)), and some even ask that a chapter of the Qur'an be sent down for them – but when one is sent down that commands fighting, they draw back ([v. 20](#)). [Ibn Kathir explains](#) that "Allah mentions that the believers were hoping that Jihad would be legislated. But when Allah ordained it, many of the people turned back" – and he explains why they did so in a way that makes it clear that the jihad in question involves hot war: they drew back, [says Ibn Kathir](#), because of "their fear, terror, and cowardice concerning meeting the enemies."

Then come more excoriations of unbelievers, with familiar charges reissued: Allah has cursed the unbelievers and made them deaf and blind ([v. 23](#)); their hearts are locked so that they cannot understand the Qur'an ([v. 24](#)); and they apostatize from Islam because Satan beguiles them ([v. 25](#)). This life is mere "play and amusement," but those who obey Allah will not have to give up their worldly goods ([v. 36](#)), but they should not hesitate to spend money in Allah's cause ([v. 38](#)).

[Sura 48](#) is also from Medina. The "victory" from Allah in [v. 1](#) is [for some](#) the Muslim conquest of Mecca late in Muhammad's life; [for others](#) it is the Treaty of Hudaibiyya, which Muhammad concluded on disadvantageous terms with the pagan Quraysh tribe of Mecca before he conquered that city. Umar, one of Muhammad's closest followers, asked him about this three times, got no answer, and then went away in fear that a passage of the Qur'an would be revealed about him! But instead there came this sura, telling Muhammad that Allah would forgive his past and future sins ([v. 2](#)) and would admit the believers to Paradise ([v. 5](#)), while the hypocrites and polytheists will go to hell ([v. 6](#)).

Those who pledge loyalty to Muhammad pledge loyalty to Allah ([v. 10](#)). Those who refused to go with Muhammad to meet the Quraysh, fearing that they would be massacred, make excuses, but Allah knows that they hoped Muhammad and the Muslims would not return ([vv. 11-12](#)). Allah tells Muhammad to tell them that they will be called upon to fight against a powerful people, unless they submit to Islam; if they fight then, they will be rewarded ([v. 16](#)). Islamic scholars differ as to which powerful people is meant – [some suggested](#) the Persians and Byzantines. The blind, lame, and ill need not fight in jihad warfare, but those who do will go to Paradise ([v. 17](#)). Allah is pleased with the believers who pledged fealty to Muhammad under the tree ([v. 18](#)) – [Ibn Kathir says](#) there were 1,400 Muslims who did so, under a tree near Hudaibiyya. Allah sent them *as-sakinah* ([v. 18](#)), which is the presence of God in the Old Testament but is understood simply as "tranquility" by Muslim commentators. He also promises the believers much booty ([v. 19](#)), which they soon collected in the raid on the Jewish settlement at the oasis of Khaybar.

The unbelievers, if they fight the Muslims, will flee ([v. 22](#)). Allah protected the believers from the unbelievers at Hudaibiyya, giving them "tranquility" ([vv. 24-26](#)) -- and the truce he concluded with the Meccans at Hudaibiyya will allow Muhammad and the Muslims to visit the Ka'aba ([v. 27](#)). Those who follow Muhammad are merciful to believers but harsh to unbelievers ([v. 29](#)) – a stark contrast to Jesus' injunction in the Sermon on the Mount to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44).

Blogging the Qur'an: Suras 49, "The Chambers," 50, "Qaf," 51, "The Winnowing Winds," and 52, "The Mount"

The late Medinan [sura 49](#) begins by telling the believers how to behave in the presence of Muhammad ([vv. 1-5](#)). One may wonder why a perfect and eternal book that contains religious and ethical instruction that is valid for all time would contain a section that applied only to people who lived in the first generation of Islam, but the answer to this is implied by the instruction to Muslims not to put themselves forward in Muhammad's presence ([v. 1](#)). This means, [says Ibn Kathir](#), that they should "not rush in making decisions before him, rather, follow his lead in all matters." After Muhammad's death Muslims can do that by heeding their prophet's directives as recorded in the authentic ahadith – a fact that traditional Muslims use to rebuke contemporary Muslims who declare that they follow the Qur'an alone.

Then [verses 6-18](#) follow with more general instructions to the believers. They should not believe the report of a wicked person ([v. 6](#)). Muhammad is among them, and if he obeyed the believers' every wish – instead of Allah's commands – there would be trouble ([v. 7](#)). Believers should not fight against one another, but they should join together to fight against a rebellious group until it returns to Allah's truth ([v. 9](#)): this is a principal justification for infighting among Islamic sects. The true believers, however, are a single brotherhood ([vv. 10, 13](#)) – one that transcends all other ties, including the national and even familial. Maududi explains that "the national and racial distinctions that cause universal corruption in the world have been condemned."

Then follows the chastising of a group of Bedouins whose faith is imperfect; they are exhorted to obey Allah and Muhammad ([v. 14](#)).

Muhammad used to recite the Meccan [sura 50](#) every Friday during his Friday sermon, and on Eids -- the festivals at the end of Ramadan and the end of the pilgrimage to Mecca. It begins with an oath -- "By the glorious Qur'an" ([v. 1](#)) -- but it is unclear who is swearing or what the oath is about. Ali suggests in a parenthetical note that it is an oath that Muhammad is a prophet: "By the Glorious Qur'an (Thou art Allah's Messenger)." [The Tafsir al-Jalalayn](#), in contrast, has it as an oath about the unbelievers: "By the glorious Qur'an, by the noble Qur'an, the disbelievers of Mecca have certainly not believed in Muhammad (s)."

But who is doing the swearing? Allah is according to Islamic doctrine the only speaker in the Qur'an, but it is curious that he the all-powerful deity would need to swear on things lesser than himself to establish his veracity. Yet such oaths proliferate in the latter part of the Qur'an (as it is arranged, not chronologically).

[Verses 2-14](#) repeat again the wonders of the natural world as evidence of Allah's power, and criticize the unbelievers for doubting the resurrection of the dead. Allah lists some earlier groups he destroyed – people who also rejected the resurrection and his messengers ([vv. 12-14](#)). Then follows a warning of the Day of Judgment and hellfire ([verses 15-30](#)). Each person is accompanied by two angels, one who records his good deeds and the other his bad deeds ([v. 17](#)). Those who reject Allah and worship other gods will be sent to hell ([vv. 24, 26](#)). The righteous, in contrast, will enter the gardens of Paradise ([verses 31-35](#)). Thus Muhammad should be patient ([v. 39](#)), for the Day of Judgment is coming ([v. 42](#)); the Qur'an is a warning ([v. 45](#)).

The Meccan [sura 51](#) is a poetic meditation on the judgment, hell, and Paradise. Allah swears by the winds ([v. 1](#)) that what Muhammad has been promised is true ([v. 5](#)). The unbelievers are deluded ([v. 9](#)) and those who spread falsehood are accursed ([v. 10](#)) -- that is, those who scoff and ask when the Day of Judgment will come ([v. 12](#)). They will taste hell ([v. 14](#)), while the righteous will enjoy Paradise ([v. 15](#)), because they rose early to pray ([v. 18](#)) and gave alms to the needy ([v. 19](#)).

[Verses 24-37](#) tell the story of Abraham’s “honored guests” – an account reminiscent of the visitation of the Lord and the “three men” to Abraham in Genesis 18. As in Genesis, the visitors tell Abraham that his wife will give birth to a son ([v. 28](#)), and she laughs derisively, as she is old and barren ([v. 29](#)). Then, also as in Genesis, the men go on to Sodom and Gomorrah, which are not named here, but are identified as a “guilty people” ([v. 32](#)) who will be destroyed ([v. 33](#)) after the righteous are evacuated ([v. 35](#)). Then follow more precedents of the destruction of unbelievers: Pharaoh ([vv. 38-40](#)); the people of ‘Ad ([vv. 41-42](#)); the people of Thamud ([vv. 43-45](#)); and Noah’s people ([v. 46](#)).

[Verses 47-49](#) rehearse some of the signs of Allah in the natural world, and then in [verses 50-53](#), Muhammad addressed the unbelievers. There is no indication, as there is in so many other places in the Qur’an, that Allah is telling Muhammad to say these things, and yet Muhammad speaks in the first person – making this another problematic passage for the Islamic belief that Allah is the sole speaker in the Qur’an. Then in [verses 54-60](#) Allah reassures Muhammad, telling him to turn away from the unbelievers, and that it isn’t his fault that they don’t believe ([v. 54](#)). They will be punished on that dreadful Day ([v. 60](#)).

[Sura 52](#) is also Meccan and deals with many of the same themes. [Verses 1-28](#) deal with hell and Paradise. The unbelievers will be sent to the hell they denied ([v. 14](#)) and asked if the fire that is burning them is fake ([v. 15](#)). The blessed will enjoy the women of Paradise, who have “beautiful big and lustrous eyes” ([v. 20](#)), and will be joined by their families ([v. 21](#)). [Ibn Kathir](#) and [the Tafsir al-Jalalayn](#) agree that this has to do with the levels of Paradise: the believing children of pious people will be admitted to the levels their parents attained, even if they weren’t as pious. The righteous will also be served in Paradise by beautiful boys ([v. 24](#)). [The Tafsir al-Jalalayn elaborates](#): “And there will circulate from all around them, for service, youths, delicate [in demeanour], of their own, as if, in terms of their beauty and immaculateness, they were hidden pearls, preserved inside shells, because when it [a pearl] is inside it, it is better than one that is not.”

[Verses 29-48](#) excoriate the unbelievers, who accuse Muhammad of being demon-possessed ([v. 29](#)) and a poet ([v. 30](#)), and of fabricating the Qur’an ([v. 33](#)). But they can’t produce anything like it ([v. 34](#)). Did they create the heavens and the earth ([v. 36](#))? Even if they saw a piece of the sky falling on them, they would say it was mere clouds ([v. 44](#)). So Muhammad should leave them alone ([v. 45](#)) and be patient ([v. 48](#)), for the unbelievers will get theirs on the Day of Judgment ([v. 46](#)).

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 53, "The Star"

Most people associate "the Satanic verses" with [the notorious novel by Salman Rushdie](#). In 1989, Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa, ordering Muslims to kill Rushdie for writing this book — and this death sentence has been perpetually reaffirmed by Iranian leaders, though no assassin has yet carried it out.

But Rushdie did not invent the "Satanic verses." The term actually refers to an incident, recorded in Islamic tradition and referred to in [Sura 53](#), in which Satan, not Allah, spoke through Muhammad's mouth. The verses that the devil gave to the Prophet of Islam have been known thereafter as "the Satanic verses."

According to Muhammad's biographer Ibn Ishaq, in a section of his biography preserved by Tabari, "the apostle was anxious for the welfare of his people" -- the pagan Quraysh -- and "longed for a way to attract them." However, ultimately it was the leaders of the Quraysh who came to him with an offer. They would give him wives and money, and even make him their king -- if he would in turn accept their condition. "This is what we will give you, Muhammad, so desist from reviling our gods and do not speak evilly of them. If you will not do so, we offer you one means which will be to your advantage and to ours."

"What is it?" asked Muhammad.

"You will worship our gods, al-Lat and al-'Uzza, for a year, and we shall worship your god for a year."

After initially rejecting the offer, Muhammad received a revelation saying that it was legitimate for Muslims to pray to al-Lat, al-Uzza, and Manat, the three goddesses favored by the pagan Quraysh, as intercessors before Allah. The Quraysh were elated, and prostrated themselves before Allah along with Muhammad and the Muslims after Muhammad finished reciting the new revelation. Ibn Ishaq recounts:

Then the people dispersed and Quraysh went out, delighted at what had been said about their gods, saying, "Muhammad has spoken of our gods in splendid fashion. He alleged in what he read that they are the exalted Gharaniq whose intercession is approved."

The Gharaniq were high-flying cranes. Muhammad meant that they were near Allah's throne, and that it was legitimate for Muslims to pray to al-Lat, al-Uzza, and Manat as intercessors before Allah. Word traveled quickly among the Muslims: "the Quraysh have accepted Islam." Since peace seemed to be at hand, some of the Muslims who had earlier fled to Abyssinia for their safety began to return. But one principal player in the drama was not at all pleased: the angel Gabriel, the one whose appearance to Muhammad had given birth to Islam. He came to Muhammad and said: "What have you done, Muhammad? You have read to these people something I did not bring you from God and you have said what He did not say to you."

Muhammad began to realize just how severely he had compromised his monotheistic message: "I have fabricated things against God and have imputed to Him words which He has not spoken." He "was bitterly grieved and was greatly in fear" of Allah for having allowed his message to be adulterated by Satan. But Allah reassured him: "Never did We send a messenger or a prophet before thee, but, when he framed a desire, Satan threw some vanity into his desire: but Allah will cancel anything vain that Satan throws in, and Allah will confirm and establish His Signs" (Qur'an [22:52](#)). Allah, says Ibn Ishaq, thereby "relieved his prophet's grief, and made him feel safe from his fears." He also sent down a new revelation to replace Satan's words about al-Lat, al-Uzza, and Manat in

sura 53, repeating the scorn that the Qur'an has elsewhere for the idea that Allah would have daughters while earthly men have sons ([vv. 19-23](#)).

Not surprisingly, Muhammad's about-face only enflamed tensions with the Quraysh all the more. Ibn Ishaq recalls that the polytheists began to use this episode against him:

When the annulment of what Satan had put upon the Prophet's tongue came from God, Quraysh said: "Muhammad has repented of what he said about the position of your gods with Allah, altered it and brought something else." Now those two words which Satan had put upon the apostle's tongue were in the mouth of every polytheist and they became more violently hostile to the Muslims and the apostle's followers.

The Satanic verses incident has naturally caused Muslims acute embarrassment for centuries. Indeed, it casts a shadow over the veracity of Muhammad's entire claim to be a prophet. After all, if Satan could put words into Muhammad's mouth once, and make him think they were revelations from Allah, who is to say that Satan did not use Muhammad as his mouthpiece on other occasions? Thus Islamic scholars, apologists, and historians have attacked the Satanic verses with particular ferocity. Muhammad Husayn Haykal argues in his *Life of Muhammad* that the incident never happened at all, and indeed could not have happened, for after all, Muhammad is a prophet:

This story arrested the attention of the western Orientalists who took it as true and repeated it ad nauseam.... It is a story whose incoherence is evident upon the least scrutiny. It contradicts the infallibility of every prophet in conveying the message of his Lord.

He marvels that even some Muslim scholars take it to be true. And its roots in the traditional sources are firm. It is hard to see how and why such a story would have been fabricated and accepted as authentic by such pious Muslims as Ibn Ishaq, Ibn Sa'd, and Tabari, as well as by the later Qur'anic commentator Zamakhshari (1074-1143), who is unlikely to have recounted it if he did not trust the sources, if it were not authentic. Here, as in many other areas, the witness of the early Islamic sources is compelling. Those who would wish away the Satanic verses cannot get around the fact that these elements of Muhammad's life were not the inventions of his enemies, but were passed along by men who believed he was indeed the Prophet of Allah.

Besides this oblique reference to the Satanic verses incident, the Meccan sura 53 contains an account of two of Muhammad's visions of the angel Gabriel, along with a challenge to the unbelievers to disprove the authenticity of those visions ([vv. 1-18](#)). Then after the denial of the three goddesses ([vv. 19-23](#)), Allah explains that unbelievers give the angels female names ([v. 28](#)) and that Muhammad should shun them ([vv. 29-30](#)).

Then follows a discourse on the differing outcomes of belief and unbelief. Allah will forgive those who avoid major sins ([v. 32](#)), but the one who turns back after embracing Islam ([vv. 33-34](#)) ignores what was told to Moses ([v. 36](#)) and Abraham ([v. 37](#)) – that no one will intercede for anyone else on the Day of Judgment ([v. 38](#)) and everyone will receive their just deserts ([v. 39](#)). Allah controls everything ([vv. 43-49](#)) and destroyed earlier populations of unbelievers ([vv. 50-54](#)). People then should heed Muhammad's warning, for the Judgment is coming soon ([vv. 55-62](#)).

Blogging the Qur'an: Suras 54, "The Moon," 55, "The Merciful," 56, "The Inevitable," and 57, "Iron"

[Ibn Kathir reports](#) that Muhammad would recite [sura 54](#), as well as [sura 50](#), "during major gatherings and occasions because they contain Allah's promises and warnings, and information about the origin of creation, Resurrection, Tawhid [the oneness of Allah], the affirmation of prophethood, and so forth among the great objectives." Sura 54 takes its name from its [first verse](#), which refers to the splitting of the moon – a miracle that, [according to a hadith](#), took place during Muhammad's lifetime. As the Muslims looked agog at the moon split into two parts, Muhammad cried, "Witness, witness (this miracle)."

[Some modern-day Muslims](#), however, claim that this verse constituted a prophecy that was fulfilled during Neil Armstrong's moon landing in 1969, when the astronauts dug up a bit of the lunar soil and brought it back – although, despite their imaginative forays into numerology in connection with this claim, it is [more than a stretch](#) to consider that gathering of a small amount of soil as amounting to a splitting of the moon.

The rest of the sura centers around the refrain, "And We have indeed made the Qur'an easy to understand and remember: then is there any that will receive admonition?," which appears in vv. [17](#), [22](#), [32](#), and [40](#). A secondary refrain is "how (terrible) was My Penalty and My Warning," which appears in vv. [16](#), [18](#), [21](#), and [30](#). Around these are familiar themes: the unbelievers turn away from Allah's signs and scorn them as magic ([v. 2](#)); Muhammad should turn away from them and leave them alone until the Day of Judgment, when they will be punished ([vv. 6-8](#)). Noah and his flood are a warning to the unbelievers of Muhammad's day ([vv. 9-16](#)), as is the destruction of the people of 'Ad ([vv. 18-22](#)); the people of Thamud ([vv. 23-31](#) – for the she-camel see [here](#)); Lot's people ([vv. 33-39](#)); and Pharaoh and his people ([vv. 41-42](#)). Are the unbelievers who reject Muhammad better than they ([v. 43](#))? They think they will be able to defend themselves if they band together ([v. 44](#)) but they will not escape the Day of Judgment ([v. 46](#)).

The Meccan [sura 55](#) is organized around a poetic refrain that is repeated much more frequently than are those in sura 54: "Which of the Lord's blessings will you deny?" (vv. [13](#), [16](#), [18](#), [21](#), [23](#), [25](#), [28](#), [30](#), [32](#), [34](#), [36](#), [38](#), [40](#), [42](#), [45](#), [53](#), [55](#), [59](#), [61](#), [65](#), [67](#), [69](#), [77](#)) – somewhat resembling Psalm 136, with its recurring "For his mercy endures forever," although even here the Qur'an is focused on magnifying, refuting, and even mocking the perversity of the unbelievers' rejection of Islam. [Says Maududi](#), "This is the only Surah of the Qur'an in which besides men the jinn also, who are the other creation of the earth endowed with freedom of will and action, have been directly addressed." The jinn are addressed with humans in [v. 31](#).

The first part ([vv. 1-30](#)) emphasizes Allah's creative power and his control of earthly phenomena; the second part ([vv. 31-78](#)) warns of the Day of Judgment and again describes hell and Paradise. Little is said that has not been said many other times in the Qur'an. The "two Easts and two Wests" of [v. 17](#) refer, [says Ibn Kathir](#), to "the sunrise of summer and winter and the sunset of summer and winter" – a decidedly geocentric point of view.

[Sura 56](#), another Meccan sura, once again warns of the Day of Judgment ([vv. 1-7](#)) and describes the rewards of the Companions of the Right Hand – that is, those who enter Paradise (vv. [10-40](#); [88-91](#)). These include, of course, the legendary virgins ([v. 36](#)), who are a "special creation" ([v. 35](#)). One way in which they are special, according to Islamic tradition, is that their virginity is endlessly renewed, so that the believers' experience of them is always just like the first. After this comes yet another description of the tortures of hell (vv. [41-56](#); [92-94](#)), and a warning to mankind based on the signs of Allah's power in the natural world ([vv. 57-76](#)). The sura concludes by praising the Qur'an as a divine revelation that only those who are ritually pure should touch ([vv. 77-80](#)). Allah taunts the

unbelievers by asking them that if they believe the Qur'an to be false and consider themselves independent of him and his power, why don't they intervene when a man is dying ([v. 83](#)) and call his soul back into his body ([v. 87](#))?

The Medinan [sura 57](#) was revealed after the Muslims conquered Mecca and faced few significant barriers to becoming the masters of all Arabia. It begins with a paean to Allah's power and a question to the unbelievers: "What ails you that you do not believe in Allah?" ([v. 8](#)). The costs of the conquest may have left the Muslims short of funds, for Allah exhorts the Muslims to contribute to the Islamic cause, although he tells them that those who did so before the conquest of Mecca will be rewarded more abundantly than those who jumped on the bandwagon only when the Muslims had definitively defeated their enemies ([vv. 10-11](#)). [Maududi explains](#): "Those who sacrifice their lives and expend their wealth to further promote the cause of Islam when it is already strong cannot attain to the rank of those who struggled with their lives and their wealth to promote and uphold the cause of Islam when it was weak."

The righteous will be rewarded with the gardens of Paradise ([vv. 12, 21](#)), while the hypocrites will be punished ([v. 13](#)) with hell ([v. 15](#)). The Muslims should not be [like the Jews and Christians](#), who received divine revelation but whose hearts grew hardened ([v. 16](#)). Instead, they should give generously ([v. 18](#)), for this world is just play and amusement, and earthly life is just deception ([v. 20](#)). Allah decrees and controls all earthly events ([v. 22](#)) – as [the Tafsir al-Jalalayn explains](#): "No affliction befalls in the earth, by way of drought, or in yourselves, such as illness, or the loss of a child, but it is in a Book, meaning, the Preserved Tablet (al-lawh al-mahfūz), before We bring it about, before We create it." Earlier prophets are invoked, along with the gift of iron, to show Allah's solicitude for mankind ([v. 25](#)). One of these earlier prophets was Jesus, but his followers invented monasticism, which Allah had not commanded. They should instead have sought his will alone; many of the Christians are "rebellious transgressors" ([v. 27](#)). The Jews and Christians have no power over Allah's grace ([v. 29](#)) – as [the Tafsir al-Jalalayn says](#), this is "contrary to their claims that they are God's beloved and those who deserve His beatitude." [Ibn Kathir explains](#) that this verse means that "they cannot prevent what Allah gives, or give what Allah prevents."

Blogging the Qur'an: Suras 58, "The Pleading Woman," and 59, "Exile"

At the beginning of the Medinan [sura 58](#), Allah tells Muhammad that he has heard the pleas of the woman whose husband attempted to divorce by telling her, "You are to me as my mother's back." A woman thus divorced could not remarry, and indeed had to remain in her ex-husband's household as, effectively, a domestic servant (see Asad's explanation in his commentary on Qur'an [33:4 here](#)). Allah directs that such a divorce is not final, but can be reversed if the husband frees a slave ([v. 3](#)), fasts for two months, or feeds sixty poor people ([v. 4](#)).

According to [Islamic tradition](#), the woman mentioned here was named Khawlah bint Tha'labah, and her husband Aws bin As-Samit, and Gabriel gave this Qur'anic passage to Muhammad after Khawlah complained to the Islamic prophet about her plight. Here again, then, the reader of the Qur'an faces two choices: either Muhammad was fabricating revelations from the supreme God in order to solve problems and settle issues he encountered in the course of his daily life, such that what claims to be an eternal book is actually filled with incidental minutiae from Muhammad's life, or every detail of his life was mapped out for all eternity by the deity in order to teach some eternal truths, and he was therefore the most important person who ever existed. There doesn't seem to be any other alternative.

Later come more indications of the incidental and ad hoc nature of the Qur'an (or, alternatively, the minute divine planning of every detail of Muhammad's life). [According to Qatadah](#), [v. 11](#) "was revealed about gatherings in places where Allah is being remembered. When someone would come to join in assemblies with the Messenger, they would hesitate to offer them space so that they would not lose their places. Allah the Exalted commanded them to spread out and make room for each other." And then Allah tells believers to make contributions before private meetings with Muhammad ([vv. 12-13](#)).

This sura also includes familiar Qur'anic themes, including the bellicose promise that "those who resist Allah and His Messenger will be humbled to dust" ([v. 5](#)). Allah sees and knows all things, including the secret meetings of the unbelievers, and will punish them on the Day of Judgment ([vv. 7-10](#)). Those who befriend those who are accursed by Allah are the party of Satan ([v. 19](#)) and will suffer in hell ([v. 17](#)). (And of course, those accursed by Allah include Jews and Christians, as per [9:30](#)). No one who loves those who resist Allah and Muhammad will enter Paradise ([v. 22](#)).

[Sura 59](#) was revealed, [according to Islamic tradition](#), after Muhammad had the Jewish an-Nadir tribe exiled from Medina. Allah "cast terror into their hearts, so that they destroyed their dwellings by their own hands and the hands of the Believers" ([v. 2](#)). [Ibn Kathir explains](#):

When the Messenger of Allah migrated to Al-Madinah, he made a peace treaty with the Jews stipulating that he would not fight them and they would not fight him. They soon betrayed the treaty that they made with Allah's Messenger. Therefore, Allah sent His torment down on them; it can never be averted, and His appointed destiny touched them; it can never be resisted. The Prophet forced them to evacuate and abandon their fortified forts that Muslims did not think they would ever control. The Jews thought that their fortifications will save them from Allah's torment, but they did not help them against Allah in the least. Then, that which they did not expect came to them from Allah, and Allah's Messenger forced them to leave Al-Madinah....

According to the historian Tabari, the betrayal of the treaty was actually a conspiracy to kill Muhammad by some members of the Banu Nadir. Rather than appealing to the Nadir leaders to turn over the guilty men, Muhammad sent word to the Nadir: "Leave my country and do not live with me. You have intended treachery." When the men of the Nadir protested and invoked that covenant,

Muhammad's messenger replied: "Hearts have changed, and Islam has wiped out the old covenants."

Abdullah bin Ubayy and some of the others that the Qur'an designates as "hypocrites" urged the Banu Nadir not to go, and promised to come to their aid if attacked (vv. [11-12](#), [16](#)). Relying on this, the Nadir told Muhammad: "We will not leave our settlements; so do as you see fit." With the displacement of responsibility onto the enemy that would become characteristic of jihad warriors throughout the ages, Muhammad told the Muslims, "The Jews have declared war." Allah then promised Muhammad that he would strike "terror" into the Jews' hearts ([v. 13](#)) and told him that both the hypocrites and the Jews would end up in hell ([v. 17](#)).

The Prophet of Islam ordered his Muslims to march out against the tribe and lay siege to them. During the siege, he [ordered that the date palms of the Banu Nadir be burnt](#). The Nadir Jews, surprised, asked him: "Muhammad, you have prohibited wanton destruction and blamed those guilty of it. Why then are you cutting down and burning our palm-trees?" Allah justified Muhammad's action by explaining that he cut down the trees "by Allah's leave" ([v. 5](#)). Islamic apologists frequently cite Muhammad's prohibition against wanton destruction — but don't mention Muhammad's own violation of this decree, and Allah's endorsement of the violation. What the Jews couldn't carry with them became Muhammad's personal property, which he distributed to the needy ([vv. 6-9](#)). He also kept some, as [Umar later recounted](#): "The properties abandoned by Banu Nadir were the ones which Allah bestowed upon His Apostle....These properties were particularly meant for the Holy Prophet....He would meet the annual expenditure of his family from the income thereof, and would spend what remained for purchasing horses and weapons as preparation for Jihad."

The sura ends with a warning to fear Allah, for the "Companions of the Fire" and the "Companions of the Garden" are not equal ([v. 20](#)), and with praise of the Qur'an, which would have made even a mountain bow down if it had been revealed on a mountain ([v. 21](#)), as well as praise of Allah himself, "the Sovereign, the Holy One, the Source of Peace, the Guardian of Faith, the Preserver of Safety, the Exalted in Might, the Irresistible, the Supreme" ([v. 23](#)), "the Creator, the Evolver, the Bestower of Forms," to whom "belong the Most Beautiful Names" ([v. 24](#)). These are among the legendary [ninety-nine names of Allah found in Islamic tradition](#).

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 60, "She Who Is Tested"

The Medinan [Sura 60](#) calls for an examination of the all-important but completely overlooked question of frames of reference: what is said is not always heard the way it is meant. Consider these remarks by President Bush and Karen Hughes, his former Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, on the Islamic Feast of Eid al-Adha, which commemorates the end of the Hajj and Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son.

In December 2006, Bush issued [a statement](#) that read in part:

For Muslims in America and around the world, Eid al-Adha is an important occasion to give thanks for their blessings and to remember Abraham's trust in a loving God. During the four days of this special observance, Muslims honor Abraham's example of sacrifice and devotion to God by celebrating with friends and family, exchanging gifts and greetings, and engaging in worship through sacrifice and charity.

And the previous January, [Hughes said](#):

Eid is a celebration of commitment and obedience to God and also of God's mercy and provision for all of us. It is a time of family and community, a time of charity....I want to read to you a message from President Bush: "I send greetings to Muslims around the world as you celebrate Eid al-Adha. When God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son, Abraham placed his faith in God above all else. During Eid al-Adha, Muslims celebrate Abraham's devotion and give thanks for God's mercy and many blessings."

In speaking of Abraham, even when doing so in the context of Eid al-Adha, Bush and Hughes were probably thinking of Genesis 22:15-18, in which Abraham is rewarded for his faith and told he will become a blessing to the nations: "by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves, because you have obeyed my voice."

But the Muslim audiences that Bush and Hughes are addressing don't read Genesis. They read the Qur'an. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son (who is not named) is recounted in [37:102-109](#). And in sura 60, Allah says that Abraham is an "excellent example" (uswa hasana, **أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ**, a term applied also to Muhammad in 33:21) for the believers when he tells his pagan family and people that "there has arisen, between us and you, enmity and hatred for ever, unless ye believe in Allah and Him alone" ([v. 4](#)). The same verse goes on to say that Abraham is *not* an excellent example when he tells his father, "I will pray for forgiveness for you." Hatred is held up as exemplary; forgiveness is explicitly declared to be not exemplary.

Bush and Hughes are thus reinforcing a worldview that takes for granted the legitimacy of everlasting enmity and hatred between Muslims and non-Muslims -- and doing so precisely in the context of trying to build bridges between Muslims and non-Muslims. This demonstrates once again how vitally important it is for them, and for the rest of us, to have a detailed understanding of the theological and cultural frame of reference of jihadists and Muslims in general. But for lack of this, not only are statements issued that could have and should have been much more carefully worded, but policy errors keep multiplying.

[According to Islamic tradition](#), this sura was revealed after Muhammad and the Muslims set out to conquer Mecca, and a Muslim named Hatib bin Abi Balta'ah notified the Meccans of the impending attack because he had relatives in Mecca. Hatib bin Abi Balta'ah was a veteran of the Battle of Badr, and so Muhammad declined Umar's request for permission to behead him, saying, "He

attended Badr. What can I tell you, perhaps Allah looked at those who attended Badr and said, ‘O the people of Badr, do what you like, for I have forgiven you.’” But then Muhammad received this sura, which takes Hatib to task for taking as his friends the enemies of Allah ([v. 1](#)) and tells him that his relatives will not help him on the Day of Judgment ([v. 3](#)). He, and Muslims generally, should emulate Abraham’s hatred of his unbelieving relatives, and not his forgiveness of them ([v. 4](#)).

Nevertheless, Allah holds out the possibility that one day the Muslims and the Quraysh will reconcile ([v. 7](#)) and tells the Muslims that they are not forbidden to deal kindly and justly with those among the Quraysh who have not fought them ([v. 8](#)) – that is, says Ibn Kathir, “those who did not have a role in your expulsion,” the expulsion of the Muslims from Mecca. But they must not turn in friendship to those who did fight against them ([v. 9](#)). This passage has been invoked by jihadists today to justify what they describe as a defensive jihad against the United States, which is, in their view, fighting against Muslims.

Then the sura turns to the Treaty of Hudaibiyya, which Muhammad had concluded in 628 on disadvantageous terms with the pagan Meccans. Muhammad had shocked his men by agreeing to provisions that seemed highly disadvantageous to the Muslims: those fleeing the Quraysh and seeking refuge with the Muslims would be returned to the Quraysh, while those fleeing the Muslims and seeking refuge with the Quraysh would not be returned to the Muslims. But according to Ibn Ishaq, when a woman of the Quraysh, Umm Kulthum, joined the Muslims in Medina, and her two brothers came to claim her in accord with the provisions of the treaty, Muhammad refused to return her: Allah had forbidden him to do so with a new revelation saying that Muslim refugees should not be returned to those whom they had fled – a revelation now enshrined in [vv. 10-13](#).

In refusing to send Umm Kulthum back to the Quraysh, Muhammad broke the treaty. Although Muslim apologists have claimed throughout history that the Quraysh broke it first, this incident came before all those by the Quraysh that Muslims point to as treaty violations. A Muslim biographer of Muhammad, Yahiya Emerick, asserts that Muhammad based his case on a bit of legal hair-splitting: the treaty stipulated that the Muslims would return to the Quraysh any *man* who came to them, not any *woman*. Even if that is true, Muhammad soon – as Emerick acknowledges – began to accept men from the Quraysh as well, thus definitively breaking the treaty. The breaking of the treaty in this way would reinforce the principle that nothing was good except what was advantageous to Islam, and nothing evil except what hindered Islam. Once the treaty was formally discarded, Islamic jurists enunciated the principle that truces in general could only be concluded on a temporary basis of up to ten years, and that they could only be entered into for the purpose of allowing weakened Muslim forces to gather strength to fight again more effectively.

This principle is tremendously relevant in today’s geopolitical situation, whenever and wherever the State Department or any other non-Muslim political entity indicates a willingness to conclude a treaty with a Muslim group that is clearly committed to traditional Islamic principles – such as Hamas and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the Philippines, with whom the Philippine government is anxious to conclude a deal. But as relevant as it is, this principle is universally ignored.

Blogging the Qur'an: Suras 61, "Battle Array," and 62, "The Congregation"

About the Medinan [sura 61](#) Abdullah bin Salam, one of the Companions of Muhammad, [tells this story](#): "We asked, 'Who among us should go to the Messenger and ask him about the dearest actions to Allah?' None among us volunteered. The Messenger sent a man to us and that man gathered us and recited this Surah, Surat As-Saff, in its entirety."

So what are among the "dearest actions to Allah"? Allah "loves those who fight in His Cause in battle array" ([v. 4](#)). He dislikes those believers who say they have done things they didn't do. [Ibn Kathir explains](#): "Some said that it was revealed about the gravity of fighting in battle, when one says that he fought and endured the battle, even though he did not do so. Qatadah and Ad-Dahhak said that this Ayah [verse] was sent down to admonish some people who used to say that they killed, fought, stabbed, and did such and such during battle, even though they did not do any of it."

Allah reminds these phonies that Moses warned his people not to annoy him, since they knew he was Allah's messenger. But once they did, Allah let them go astray ([v. 5](#)). He also reminds them that Jesus came to tell the Jews that his message confirmed that of the Torah, and that he was the precursor of a messenger who would come after him, whose name would be Ahmad. But the people would dismiss Jesus' miracles as "sorcery" ([v. 6](#)) – recalling their dismissal of Moses ([28:36](#)) and Muhammad ([28:48](#)).

"Ahmad" means "the Most Praised One," and it is etymologically related to Muhammad, which means "Praised One." Pickthall drives the connection home by translating "Ahmad" simply as "Praised One." And Muslims universally understand the verse as depicting Jesus predicting the coming of Muhammad.

Muslims contend that this prophecy is the uncorrupted version of the words of Jesus that survive in corrupted form in John 14:16-17, where Jesus says: "And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you."

"Counselor" here is παρακλητος, Paracletos or Paraclete. Some Islamic apologists have claimed that this is a corruption of περικλυτος, Periclytos, which means "famous" or "renowned," i.e., "Praised One." However, there is no textual evidence whatsoever for this: no manuscripts of the New Testament exist that use the word περικλυτος in this place. Nor is it likely that the two words might have been confused. That kind of confusion may be theoretically possible in Arabic, which does not write vowels and hence would present two words with identical consonant structures. But Greek does write vowels, and so the words would never in Greek have appeared as even close to identical.

Then Allah excoriates the man who "invents falsehood against Allah, even as he is being invited to Islam" ([v. 7](#)) – that is, [says Ibn Kathir](#), "none is more unjust than he who lies about Allah and calls upon rivals and associates partners with Him, even while he is being invited to Tawhid [the divine unity] and sincerely worshipping Him." They want to extinguish Allah's light and hate his religion ([v. 9](#)), but, [in the words of the Tafsir al-Jalalayn](#), "it is He Who has sent His Messenger with the guidance and the religion of truth, that He may make it prevail, that He may raise it over all other religions, over all the religions which oppose it, though the disbelievers be averse to this."

Allah will admit the believers to Paradise ([v. 12](#)) and grant them victory ([v. 13](#)). One of the Jews believed in Jesus and some didn't – Allah granted victory to those who did ([v. 14](#)). This is referring, of course, to Jesus the prophet of Islam. In explaining this verse, [Ibn Kathir outlines](#) the Muslim view of both Jews and Christians. The Jews "rejected what 'Isa brought them, denied his prophethood and invented terrible lies about him and his mother. They are the Jews, may Allah curse them until the Day of Judgment." The Christians, meanwhile, "exaggerated over 'Isa, until they elevated him to more than the level of prophethood that Allah gave him. They divided into sects and factions, some saying that 'Isa was the son of Allah, while others said that he was one in a trinity, and this is why they invoke the father, the son and the holy ghost! Some of them said that

‘Isa was Allah...”

The Medinan [sura 62](#) features the claim that Muhammad was illiterate ([v. 2](#)). Islamic apologists refer frequently to this claim in order to throw into sharp relief what they consider to be the miraculous character of the Qur’an. This sublime book of poetry, they say, could not have been written by any ordinary man — and certainly not by one who was illiterate.

However, this claim has no actual Qur’anic support at all. As [Daniel Ali](#) has pointed out, Islamic commentators base their claims on the Arabic word *ome*, which they translate as “illiterate.” This is one meaning of the word. However, it has another meaning that has nothing to do with reading or writing. The Qur’an’s use of the word establishes that this meaning is the one it is using. [V. 2](#) says, “It is He that sent forth among the *omeyeen* [the plural of *ome*] an apostle of their own....” This same word is repeated in many other places in the Koran, including [2:78](#), [3:20](#), [3:75](#), and [7:157-158](#). Almost all Muslim scholars interpret the word *omeyeen* in these passages as meaning “illiterate.”

Yet if the word *omeyeen* refers to illiteracy, [v. 2](#) would be saying that Allah sent forth to all illiterates one of their own. The unlikelihood of this is reinforced by the fact that in classical Arabic, *omeyeen* never referred to illiterates or to illiteracy. It refers to non-Jewish people: [v. 2](#) is saying that Allah has sent a gentile apostle to the gentiles. *Omeyeen* is an adjectival form of the Arabic noun for gentiles, and not all gentiles were illiterate during the time of Muhammad.

The rest of the sura contains the usual excoriations of unbelievers, plus a reminder to respond to the Call to Prayer on Friday ([vv. 9-11](#)). There is a chilling statement: “Say: ‘O ye that stand on Judaism! If ye think that ye are friends to Allah, to the exclusion of other men, then express your desire for death, if ye are truthful!’” ([v. 6](#)). This has become a staple theme of contemporary jihadism: not long after 9/11, [an Afghani jihadist declared](#): “The Americans lead lavish lives and they are afraid of death. We are not afraid of death. The Americans love Pepsi Cola, we love death.” Such love, according to this verse, is a sign of friendship with Allah.

Blogging the Qur'an: Suras 63, "The Hypocrites," 64, "Haggling," 65, "Divorce," and 66, "Prohibition"

[Sura 63](#) excoriates the hypocrites who opposed Muhammad in Medina ([vv. 1-6](#)). [According to Maududi](#), it came to Muhammad in response to the machinations of one of the leaders of the hypocrites, Abdullah bin Ubayy. When the Jewish Qaynuqa tribe surrendered to the Muslims, some of the Qaynuqa who had made alliances among the Muslims came forward to plead their case before Muhammad. According to Tabari, Muhammad wanted to have all the men of the tribe put to death. However, Abdullah bin Ubayy implored Muhammad: "O Muhammad, deal kindly with my clients." Muhammad ignored him, so Abdullah repeated the request, whereupon the Prophet of Islam turned his face away from Abdullah. Abdullah bin Ubayy then impetuously caught Muhammad by the collar of his robe, whereupon, according to Ibn Ishaq, "the apostle was so angry that his face became almost black." Muhammad said to Abdullah, "Confound you, let me go."

But Abdullah replied, "No, by God, I will not let you go until you deal kindly with my clients. Four hundred men without mail and three hundred mailed protected me from all mine enemies; would you cut them down in one morning? By God, I am a man who fears that circumstances may change." Muhammad then granted him his request, agreeing to spare the Qaynuqa as long as they turned over their property as booty to the Muslims and left Medina, which they did forthwith.

Still, Muhammad was unhappy with the alliance Abdullah had made with the Jewish tribe. It was at this point that he received a key revelation about the relationships that should prevail between Muslims and non-Muslims: "O ye who believe! Take not the Jews and the Christians for your friends and protectors: They are but friends and protectors to each other. And he amongst you that turns to them (for friendship) is of them. Verily Allah guideth not a people unjust" ([5:51](#)). And Allah scolded in harsh terms those who, like Abdullah bin Ubayy, feared a loss of business prospects because of the misfortune of the Qaynuqa ([5:52](#)). In sura 63, Allah criticizes them for discouraging people to contribute money to the cause of Islam ([vv. 7, 9-10](#)).

The Meccan [sura 64](#) repeats oft-repeated themes: Allah has dominion over all things ([v. 1](#)); he knows the secrets of every person's heart ([vv. 2, 4](#)); those who reject Allah's messengers will suffer a terrible punishment ([vv. 5-6](#)); they doubt that they will be raised from the grave and judged ([v. 7](#)), but they will, and the righteous will enter Paradise ([v. 9](#)) while the damned will go to hell ([v. 10](#)). No calamity befalls anyone unless it is Allah's will ([v. 11](#)), so obey Allah and Muhammad, but Muhammad is not responsible for those who reject his message ([v. 12](#)). The warning that one's enemies may be his own wives and children ([v. 14](#)) arose from an incident recounted by Ibn Abbas: "There were men who embraced Islam in Makkah and wanted to migrate to Allah's Messenger. However, their wives and children refused to allow them. Later when they joined Allah's Messenger, they found that those who were with him (the Companions) have gained knowledge in the religion, so they were about to punish their wives and children" – whereupon Allah counseled them to forgive them ([v. 14](#) also).

The sura ends with another appeal to give money for the cause of Islam ([vv. 16-17](#)).

The Medinan [sura 65](#) lays down rules for divorce. If a man wishes to divorce his wife, he has to [wait through two menstrual periods](#) to make sure she isn't pregnant first ([v. 1](#)) – or three months for those who are post-menopausal ([v. 4](#)). The talk about taking them back ([v. 2](#)) refers to the fact that in Islamic law a man can take his wife after divorcing her twice, but after the third divorce he cannot take her back so easily. Muhammad directed that in such a case, the divorced woman would have to consummate a marriage with another man and be divorced by him – only then could she return to her first husband if he wished her to do so:

The wife of Rifa'a Al-Qurazi came to the Prophet and said, "I was Rifa'a's wife, but he divorced me and it was a final irrevocable divorce. Then I married AbdurRahman bin Az-Zubair but he is impotent." The Prophet asked her, "Do you want to remarry Rifa'a? You cannot unless you had a complete sexual relation with your present husband."

Then the sura concludes with more warnings of the destruction of unbelieving populations ([v. 8](#)) and the impending, unavoidable Judgment ([v. 10](#)).

[Ibn Abbas once asked Umar](#), the renowned Companion of Muhammad and his second successor as leader of the Muslim community, about the beginning of the Medinan [sura 66](#): "O Chief of the believers! Who were the two ladies from among the wives of the Prophet to whom Allah said: 'If you two return in repentance ([66.4](#))'?"

Umar replied, "I am astonished at your question, O Ibn Abbas. They were Aisha and Hafsa." According to Umar, Hafsa, one of Muhammad's wives, had been angering Muhammad by talking back to him. So when Umar learned that Muhammad had divorced all his wives, he was not surprised; in fact he was jubilant and exclaimed: "Hafsa is a ruined loser! I expected that would happen some day."

Umar then went to Muhammad, who initially declines to receive him and then relents. "I greeted him and while still standing, I said: 'Have you divorced your wives?' He raised his eyes to me and replied in the negative." Umar explained to Abdullah that "the Prophet did not go to his wives because of the secret which Hafsa had disclosed to Aisha, and he said that he would not go to his wives for one month as he was angry with them when Allah admonished him (for his oath that he would not approach Maria). When twenty-nine days had passed, the Prophet went to Aisha first of all."

The background of this is that Hafsa had caught Muhammad in bed with his concubine, Maria the Copt, on the day he was supposed to spend with Hafsa. Muhammad promised to stay away from Mary and asked Hafsa to keep the matter a secret, but Hafsa told Aisha. Then Allah stepped in with the revelation of the threat of divorce that we now find in [vv. 1-6](#), freeing Muhammad from his oath to stay away from Mary.

[Another tradition](#) explains the same verses as concerning only his wives' jealousy (or perhaps Muhammad's bad breath) and his oath to stop drinking honey. In this case what the Prophet has held forbidden that Allah has made lawful for him would be honey. That is, Muhammad tried to please his consorts by promising to give up honey, and Allah is allowing him to break this oath and threatening the errant wives with divorce.

Then [vv. 7-12](#) conclude sura 66 with more warnings of hell for the unbelievers. Allah tells Muhammad to "strive hard" (*jahidi*, جاهد) against the unbelievers and hypocrites. [Ibn Kathir explains](#): "Allah the Exalted orders His Messenger to perform Jihad against the disbelievers and hypocrites, the former with weapons and armaments and the later by establishing Allah's legislated penal code."

Blogging the Qur'an: Suras 67, "Sovereignty," 68, "The Pen," 69, "The Reality," 70, "The Ways of Ascent," and 71, "Noah"

The Meccan [sura 67](#) contains brief repetitions of many familiar and oft-repeated themes of the Quran: Allah controls all things and designed his creation perfectly ([vv. 1-5](#)); the unbelievers will suffer the pains of hell and will at that point regret having rejected Allah's messengers ([vv. 6-11](#)); the righteous shall be rewarded ([v. 12](#)); Allah knows what is in everyone's heart ([vv. 13-14](#)); Allah sustains all things and death can come without notice, so it is better to be mindful of Allah and obey him than to ignore him ([vv. 15-22](#)). The sura concludes with Allah giving Muhammad six things to say to the unbelievers in response to their skepticism about whether and when the Day of Judgment will come ([vv. 23-30](#)).

Likewise [sura 68](#), an early Meccan sura, traverses very familiar ground. Allah consoles Muhammad over the unbelievers' rejection of his message, assures him that he is not mad or possessed ([v. 2](#)) but actually has an exalted character ([v. 4](#)). [According to Aisha and others](#), this refers to the fact that Muhammad's character conformed entirely to the Qur'an, such that he was the living embodiment of its ethos. Those who accuse Muhammad of madness are the ones who are mad ([v. 6](#)). Muhammad should not listen to them ([vv. 8, 10](#)). Muhammad's unnamed accuser is a violent, cruel slanderer ([vv. 11, 13](#)) who rejects the signs (verses of the Qur'an) of Allah as "tales of the ancients" ([v. 15](#)) – but soon Allah will brand him on the nose ([v. 16](#))! Islamic tradition identifies this unfortunate man as al-Walid ibn al-Mughira, an opponent of Muhammad from among the pagan Quraysh. Of him [Ibn Abbas says](#): "We know of no one whom God has described in the derogatory way in which He describes him, blighting him with ignominy that will never leave him." Was this curse fulfilled? [The Tafsir al-Jalalayn informs us](#) that "his nose was chopped off by a sword at Badr."

Then follows a parable. Allah blessed the "people of the garden" but they were ungrateful and ignored the warning of a man who invited them to glorify Allah ([v. 28](#)); thus they lost their garden, and only then did they realize that they needed to repent and return to Allah ([vv. 17-33](#)). The message is that failure to heed Muhammad's words will lead to ruin in both this life and the next ([v. 33](#)). Allah in then taunts the unbelievers with questions ([vv. 34-41, 46-47](#))– do they have a sacred book that tells them everything they want to hear ([vv. 36-38](#))? Can they produce the partners they worship along with Allah ([v. 41](#))? The Day of Judgment will surely come ([vv. 42-45](#)), so Muhammad should wait in patience and not be like the complaining Jonah – the "companion of the fish" ([v. 48](#)), even when the unbelievers try to trip him up with their eyes ([v. 51](#)). They were, [says the Tafsir al-Jalalayn](#), "looking at you in a severe way, almost hurling you to the ground or making you fall from your place, when they hear the Reminder, the Qur'an, and they say, out of envy: 'He is truly a madman!', on account of the Qur'an that he has brought."

[Sura 69](#), another early Meccan sura, occasioned the conversion of Umar, who became the leader of the believers after the deaths of Muhammad and his first successor, Abu Bakr. [Umar explained](#):

Before embracing Islam, one day I came out of my house with a view to causing trouble to the Holy Prophet, but he had entered the Masjid al-Haram before me. When I arrived I found that he was reciting surah Al-Haaqqah [sura 69] in the Prayer. I stood behind him and listened. As he recited the Qur'an I wondered at its literary charm and beauty. Then suddenly an idea came to my mind that he must be a poet as the Quraish alleged. Just at that moment he recited the words: "This is the Word of an honorable Messenger: it is not the word of a poet." I said to myself: Then, he must be a soothsayer, if not a poet. Thereupon he recited the words: "Nor is it the word of a soothsayer: little it is that you reflect. It is a Revelation from the Lord and Sustainer of the worlds. On hearing this Islam entered deep into my heart.

The sura opens by asserting the divine judgment as a “sure reality” ([vv. 1-3](#)); then it lists some of the disobedient peoples punished on earth by Allah for their rejection of his messengers ([v. 10](#)): the Thamud and ‘Ad people ([vv. 4-8](#)); the people of Pharaoh ([v. 9](#)); and the people of Noah ([vv. 11-12](#)). Then follows a description of the Day of Judgment ([vv. 13-18](#)) and of the fate of the righteous ([vv. 19-24](#)) and of the damned ([vv. 25-37](#)). The sura concludes ([vv. 38-52](#)) by assuring us again that this a true revelation from Allah, not the word of a poet ([v. 41](#)) or a soothsayer ([v. 42](#)). Nor did the messenger invent it – for if he did, Allah would cut the artery of his heart ([vv. 44-46](#)).

The early Meccan [sura 70](#) is similar. It begins with the assurance that no one can ward off the punishment that Allah (“Lord of the Ways of Ascent”) has in store for the unbelievers ([vv. 1-4](#)). So Muhammad should be patient, because the Day will certainly come ([vv. 5-7](#)). The dreadful Day is described again ([vv. 8-18](#)). Then the unbelievers are contrasted with the righteous: the unbelievers are anxious and stingy ([vv. 19-21](#)), while the believers are steadfast in prayer ([v. 23](#)), help the needy ([v. 25](#)), believe in the Day of Judgment ([v. 26](#)), guard their chastity except with their wives and slave girls ([vv. 29-30](#)), respect their treaties and covenants ([v. 32](#)), and are attentive in worship ([v. 34](#)). The unbelievers don’t even long to enter the Gardens of Delight ([v. 38](#)), but the Day will surely come upon them anyway ([vv. 42-44](#)).

The Meccan [sura 71](#) contains Noah’s message to his people and then his prayer to Allah. Here again there are strong parallels to Muhammad’s message, with the oblique lesson being that those who reject Muhammad will suffer the same fate as those who rejected Noah. Like Muhammad, Noah is a “warner” ([v. 2](#)), but his hearers are obstinate and refuse to listen ([v. 7](#)). Like Muhammad, Noah tells the unbelievers that Allah will bless them in this world ([vv. 11-12](#)) but they still won’t listen. Like Muhammad, Noah invokes the signs of Allah’s power in creation ([vv. 13-20](#)). As they plot against Muhammad, so the unbelievers plotted against Noah ([v. 22](#)). So the unbelievers are drowned in the flood ([v. 25](#)), as Noah prays that none of them be left on the earth ([v. 26](#)), for they will only mislead the believers ([v. 27](#)). Noah prays that Allah bless the believers while increasing the destruction and punishment of the unbelievers ([v. 28](#)).

Blogging the Qur'an: Suras 72, "The Jinn," 73, "The Mantled One," 74, "The Cloaked One," 75, "Resurrection," and 76, "Man"

In [The Caliph's House](#), Tahir Shah's marvelous account of his adventures moving his family to Morocco and buying and refurbishing a home in Casablanca, Shah is repeatedly amazed by the belief of the locals (including Westernized Moroccans whom he believes to be sophisticated) in the existence of jinn, the mischievous spirit beings who interfere in human affairs. And their invariable reply to his astonished inquiries is "It's in the Qur'an."

One of the most prominent treatments of the jinn in the Qur'an is in the Meccan [sura 72](#). In [verses 1-15](#) they recount their hearing of a wonderful "recitation," or "Qur'an," which leads them to profess belief in Allah who "has taken neither a wife nor a son" ([v. 3](#)). Then [verses 16-28](#) contain warnings for the unbelievers: if only they had accepted Islam, Allah would have sent them rain – indicating once again that obedience to Allah brings earthly prosperity. The "places of worship are for Allah alone" ([v. 18](#)) – as [Qatadah explains](#): "Whenever the Jews and Christians used to enter their churches and synagogues, they would associate partners with Allah. Thus, Allah commanded His Prophet to tell them that they should single Him out alone for worship." The sura ends with warnings that while Muhammad may seem weak, Allah's promises are sure, and the unbelievers will taste hell ([vv. 23-24](#)).

The Meccan [sura 73](#) begins with Allah addressing Muhammad as "you who are wrapped in garments" ([v. 1](#)), as Muhammad was holding vigil in prayer during the night. Allah gives him instructions about how long he should pray ([vv. 3-4, 20](#)) and a promise of further revelations ([v. 5](#)). Allah commands Muhammad to give him his full devotion ([v. 8](#)), and to be patient with the unbelievers ([v. 10](#)) who will suffer the tortures of hell ([vv. 13-14](#)). Muhammad is a messenger as was Moses to Pharaoh, and those who refuse to accept his message will be punished as was Pharaoh ([vv. 15-16](#)). The believers should read as much of the Qur'an as is easy for them, as Allah knows they're busy with jihad, or some may be ill or traveling ([v. 20](#)).

[Sura 74](#), also Meccan, begins in a similar fashion: Allah addresses Muhammad as "you wrapped up in your cloak" ([v. 1](#)) and commands him to deliver his warning ([v. 2](#)). Muhammad should keep himself pure ([vv. 4-5](#)) and not expect any material gain from preaching Allah's word ([v. 6](#)). Then Allah describes the ruin and damnation of an unbeliever who scoffed at Muhammad's message, culminating in his torture in hellfire ([vv. 8-29](#)).

After that comes a cryptic and famous verse: "Above it are nineteen" ([v. 30](#)). Above what? Nineteen what? The text offers no clear answer, and that is where the fun begins. [Here](#) is a discussion that airs out many theories regarding this verse, including the theory of the Qur'anic scholar Günther Lüling, who suggests a slight emendation of the text to make it a simple reference to the gates of hell – which works in context. But the existing cryptic verse has become the foundation for numerous elaborate flights of Islamic numerology, attempting to show that this verse contains a hidden number-based key that demonstrates the Qur'an's miraculous character. The verse has also led to the development of a mysticism surrounding the number nineteen -- such that some have opined, despite the many nominees for the role of "twentieth hijacker," that there is no such person, and the number of nineteen hijackers was chosen for the September 11, 2001 jihad missions because of the mystical significance of the number.

The following verse looks as if it dropped in from somewhere else, as it is lengthy and discursive in the middle of what is otherwise a sura full of clipped, poetic verses. It reinforces the mysticism surrounding the number nineteen saying of the angels who act as "Guardians of the Fire" that Allah has "fixed their number only as a trial for unbelievers, in order that the People of the Book may arrive at certainty, and the believers may increase in Faith" ([v. 31](#)). If this is meant to say that the

number of angels guarding hell is nineteen, how would that fact help the Jews, Christians, and other People of the Book become certain that Muhammad was a prophet, and strengthen the Muslims' faith? That question is left unanswered in the text, but in Islamic history it is where the numerological mysticism begins. And the object of it is always to demonstrate the truth of the Qur'an, so as to show the People of the Book that, as [Ibn Kathir puts it](#), Muhammad "speaks according to the same thing that they have with them of heavenly revealed Scriptures that came to the Prophets before him." But ultimately Allah is absolutely sovereign regarding who will accept Muhammad's message and who doesn't, for the verse repeats again the often-repeated Qur'anic adage, "Allah leaves to stray those whom He pleases, and guides those whom He pleases."

Then the sura concludes ([vv. 32-56](#)) with more warnings of hellfire, with the unbelievers lamenting that they landed there because they didn't pray ([v. 43](#)) or feed the poor ([v. 44](#)). Instead, they used to talk vanities ([v. 45](#)) and deny the Day of Judgment ([v. 46](#)), on which no one will be there to intercede for them ([v. 48](#)).

The Meccan [sura 75](#) is a poetic meditation on the resurrection and divine judgment, and on those who doubt that they will come. Allah *can* reassemble the bones of the dead ([vv. 3-4, 40](#)), and when the Day comes, man will find no refuge from judgment ([vv. 10-11, 34-36](#)). Instead, he will be evidence against himself even as he makes excuses ([vv. 14-15](#)). Those who gave nothing in charity, did not pray, and rejected the truth will be damned ([vv. 30-32](#)).

Allah also tells Muhammad not to try to memorize the Qur'an hastily as it is being revealed to him ([vv. 16-19](#)). As the [Tafsir al-Jalalayn explains](#): "God, exalted be He, says to His Prophet: Do not move your tongue with it, with the Qur'an, before Gabriel is through with [reciting] it, to hasten it, fearing to lose it." Allah will make sure he remembers it, as [Ibn Kathir says](#): "Allah would make sure to collect it in his chest, and He would make it easy for him to recite it in the same way that it was revealed to him." This passage doesn't discuss the possibility that Allah might cause some parts of the Qur'an to be forgotten, as mentioned in [2:106](#).

[Sura 76](#), Meccan as well, dwells on the rewards of the righteous. Because they helped the needy ([vv. 8-10](#)) they will be delivered from evil on the Day of Judgment ([v. 11](#)) into a decidedly physical Paradise: Allah will reward them with a place in the Garden, where they will wear silk garments ([vv. 12, 21](#)) and sit on thrones, protected from the heat and the cold ([v. 13](#)). They will enjoy low-hanging fruit ([v. 14](#)) and drink from silver vessels and crystal goblets ([v. 15](#)) a wine mixed with ginger ([v. 17](#)) while immortal boys like pearls serve them ([v. 19](#)).

Allah has revealed the Qur'an to Muhammad in stages ([v. 23](#)); Muhammad should therefore be patient and not listen to the unbelievers ([v. 24](#)), remaining constant in prayer ([vv. 25-26](#)). Those who love this fleeting life should be warned: they will suffer a grievous penalty ([vv. 27-31](#)).

Blogging the Qur'an: Suras 77-86

We have now entered into the section of the Qur'an in which the suras are Meccan, brief, poetic, striking in their vivid imagery, and generally focused on urgent warnings of the impending Day of Judgment. "Ah woe, that Day, to the Rejecters of Truth!" This is the focus and refrain of [sura 77](#),

"The Emissaries" (vv. [15](#), [19](#), [24](#), [28](#), [34](#), [37](#), [40](#), [45](#), [47](#), [49](#)). Woe to them, for they will be punished severely on the Day of Sorting (vv. [13](#), [14](#), [38](#)), when Allah will separate those who rejected Islam from those who accepted it. He taunts the unbelievers, saying that on that Day, "If now you have any wit, outwit Me" ([v. 39](#)).

[Sura 78](#), "The Announcement," is similar, warning of that terrible Day of Sorting ([v. 17](#)), and warning that those damned to hell will be made to drink a "boiling fluid and a fluid, dark, murky, intensely cold" ([v. 25](#)), while the righteous in the garden will enjoy "voluptuous women of equal age" ([v. 33](#)). [According to Ibn Abbas, Mujahid and others](#), "This means round breasts. They meant by this that the breasts of these girls will be fully rounded and not sagging, because they will be virgins, equal in age. This means that they will only have one age."

More of the same comes in [sura 79](#), "Soul Snatchers," which begins with Allah swearing by heavenly bodies and angels in language that could refer to both or either. Allah makes many such oaths in these short, chronologically early chapters of the Qur'an - a curious practice, to be sure, and one that calls into question the Islamic dogma that Allah is the sole speaker of every word of the Qur'an, since it would make much more sense for Muhammad to be the one making these oaths. Pharaoh's disobedience of Moses' warning, and his subsequent punishment, is once again invoked ([vv. 15-25](#)), as a clear analogy to the hazards of rejecting Muhammad's message, since he, like Moses, is a "warner" for those who fear the Day of Judgment ([v. 45](#)).

The Qur'an frequently tells Muslims to obey Muhammad ([3:32](#); [3:132](#); [4:13](#); [4:59](#); [4:69](#); [4:80](#); [5:92](#); [8:1](#); [8:20](#); [8:46](#); [9:71](#); [24:47](#); [24:51](#); [24:52](#); [24:54](#); [24:56](#); [33:33](#); [47:33](#); [49:14](#); [58:13](#); [64:12](#)) and offers him as an "excellent example" for the conduct of individual Muslims ([33:21](#)) - yet it also takes for granted that he is capable of sin. One of the clearest indications of Muhammad's susceptibility to sin comes in [sura 80](#), "He Frowned," in which Allah rebukes Muhammad for turning away a poor blind man while lavishing attention on a rich man ([vv. 1-12](#)). In yet another oddity involving the speaker and audience of the Qur'an, the sura begins by speaking of Muhammad in the third person, although elsewhere in the Qur'an Allah usually addresses his prophet directly, with a few notable exceptions.

Then follows praise of the Qur'an ([vv. 13-16](#)) and a meditation on the perversity of humanity in rejecting Allah, whose signs are everywhere in the natural world ([vv. 17-42](#)).

[Sura 81](#), "The Overthrowing," paints a vivid and arresting picture of the Day of Judgment, when the natural world will be rolled up ([vv. 1-6](#)), the souls will be sorted out ([v. 7](#)), and the female infant who was buried alive will be asked for what crime she was executed ([vv. 8-9](#)). Muslims have pointed to this with pride throughout Islamic history, asserting that Islam put an end to the pagan Arab practice of burying female babies alive.

Allah identifies Muhammad as "a most honourable Messenger, endued with Power, with rank before the Lord of the Throne" ([vv. 19-20](#)), who is not possessed or mad ([v. 22](#)) and is not conveying the words of an evil spirit ([v. 25](#)). His message will profit "whoever among you wills to go straight" ([v. 28](#)), but no one can so will "except as Allah wills" ([v. 29](#)) - another denial of human free will.

[Sura 82](#), "The Cleaving," paints a picture of the Day of Judgment very similar to that in sura 81, warning of the end of the world and excoriating those who "reject Right and Judgment" ([v. 9](#)). And on that dreadful Day, "no soul shall have power to do anything for another" ([v. 19](#)).

[Sura 83](#), "Defrauding," explains that on that Day, the written record of the deeds of wicked (*Sijjin*, [vv. 7-9](#)) and the written record of the deeds of the righteous (*Illiyin*, [vv. 18-21](#)) will be opened, and everyone will be sent to Paradise or hell. The sinners used to laugh at the righteous and make fun of them, but on that Day the righteous will laugh at the unbelievers ([vv. 29-34](#)).

Very similar to these is [sura 84](#), "The Sundering," which begins with another recounting of the natural catastrophes that will attend the Day of Judgment ([vv. 1-5](#)), moves on to speak of the written records of the deeds of each individual ([vv. 6-12](#)) and of the hollowness of the earthly happiness enjoyed by those who reject Allah ([vv. 13-15](#)). Then the wonders of the natural world are again invoked as proof of the reality of Allah ([vv. 16-18](#)) and the sura concludes with more warning of the penalty that awaits the perverse unbelievers ([vv. 19-25](#)).

[Sura 85](#), "Constellations," pronounces woe upon "the makers of the pit" ([vv. 4-10](#)), who were enemies of the believers. [Ibn Kathir explains](#): "This is information about a group of people who were among the disbelievers. They went after those among them who believed in Allah and they attempted to force them to give up their religion. However, the believers refused to recant, so they dug a ditch for them in the ground. Then they lit a fire in it and prepared some fuel for it in order to keep it ablaze. Then they tried to convince them (the believers) to [apostatize] from their religion (again), but they still refused them. So they threw them into the fire." Then follows praise of Allah and more lamentation over the perverse rejection of him by the unbelievers ([vv. 11-20](#)), followed by praise of the Qur'an as glorious and "inscribed on a Preserved Tablet" ([vv. 21-22](#)) - a foundation of the Islamic doctrine that the Qur'an is eternal.

[Sura 86](#), "The Morning Star," invites men to ponder their creation "from a drop emitted" ([v. 6](#)) as proof that Allah can raise the dead on the Day of Judgment ([v. 8](#)). The Qur'an is a "conclusive word" ([v. 13](#)) - the last word on all disputed questions - and is "no joke" ([v. 14](#)). The unbelievers are plotting against the Muslims ([v. 15](#)), but Allah is likewise plotting against them ([v. 16](#)), so Muhammad should give them a break for awhile ([v. 17](#)). "This means," [says Ibn Kathir](#), "that you will see what befalls them of torment, punishment and destruction." That torment will not fail to materialize, and no man can hold it back.

Blogging the Qur'an: Suras 87-95

There is yet more doom and judgment in these Meccan suras: in [Sura 87](#), “The Most High,” Allah tells Muhammad to glorify Allah for his ordering of creation ([vv. 1-5](#)). Then Allah assures Muhammad that he will teach him the Qur'an in sections, so that he won't forget “except as Allah wills” ([vv. 6-7](#)) – which recalls Allah's later promise that he won't cause any part of the Qur'an to be forgotten unless he replaces it with something better or just as good ([2:106](#)). Muhammad must warn the people; those who fear Allah will heed the warning ([v. 10](#)), while those who do not will be cast into the fire ([vv. 12-13](#)). This message, the Qur'an asserts, is the same as that which is contained in earlier revelations, specifically the books of Abraham and Moses ([vv. 18-19](#)). Islamic apologists take the fact that the Qur'anic message turns out not to be the same as that of the existing books of Moses as evidence that the Jews have corrupted their Scriptures.

[Sura 88](#), “The Overwhelming Event,” offers a succinct recapitulation of the central themes of many of these suras: the unbelievers will suffer tortures in hell ([vv. 1-7](#)); the believers will enjoy the pleasures of the gardens of Paradise ([vv. 8-16](#)); the creation bears witness to Allah's creating hand ([vv. 17-20](#)); Muhammad's role is simply to warn of what is to take place, not to manage men's affairs, and Allah will punish the unbelievers ([vv. 21-26](#)).

Maududi says that [sura 89](#), “The Dawn,” “was revealed at the stage when persecution of the new converts to Islam had begun in Makkah.” Accordingly the sura rehearses the scourges that Allah brought upon those who had rejected the word of earlier prophets ([vv. 6-14](#)) and warns the unjust man who loves wealth and does not feed the poor that the Judgment and hell will inevitably come upon him ([vv. 15-30](#)).

In [sura 90](#), “The City,” Allah calls Mecca to witness ([v. 1](#)), and Muhammad is a resident of Mecca ([v. 2](#)), and the bond between parent and child ([v. 3](#)), that he has created mankind for a life of labor ([v. 4](#)), and so therefore a man should not think that he is responsible to no greater power ([vv. 5-10](#)). But such a man has not tried to take the ascending path ([vv. 11-12](#)), which involves freeing the slave ([v. 13](#)), feeding the hungry ([v. 14](#)), and caring for the orphaned ([v. 15](#)) and poor ([v. 16](#)). Those who do these things will be blessed ([vv. 17-18](#)), while those who do not will suffer in hell ([vv. 19-20](#)).

In [sura 91](#), “The Sun,” Allah swears by the sun ([v. 1](#)), the moon ([v. 2](#)), the day ([v. 3](#)), the night ([v. 4](#)), heaven ([v. 5](#)), earth ([v. 6](#)), and the soul ([v. 7](#)) that one who purifies the soul will succeed ([v. 9](#)) and one who corrupts it will fail ([v. 10](#)). Then follows ([vv. 11-15](#)) another reference to the prophet Salih and the story of the she-camel of Allah, which we have seen before in suras [11](#) and [26](#). [Explains Ibn Kathir](#): “A crowd of them gathered and demanded that he immediately bring forth from the rock a she-camel that was ten months pregnant, and they pointed to a certain rock in their midst. Allah's Prophet Salih made them promise that if he responded to their request, they would believe in him and follow him. So they agreed to that. The Prophet of Allah Salih, peace be upon him, stood and prayed, then he prayed to Allah to grant them their request. Then the rock to which they had pointed split open, revealing a she-camel that was ten months pregnant, exactly as they had requested. So some of them believed, but most of them disbelieved.” Indeed, some of them set upon the camel and hamstrung it ([v. 14](#)), for which they were duly punished.

[Sura 92](#), “The Night,” is an exhortation to charitable giving. The one who “gives and is dutiful” ([v. 5](#)) will be rewarded with “Bliss” ([v. 7](#)), while the “greedy miser” who “thinks himself self-sufficient” ([v. 8](#)) will end up only in “misery” ([v. 10](#)).

Then the focus turns to Muhammad himself. Allah consoles Muhammad in [sura 93](#), “The Morning Hours,” telling him he has not forsaken him, and is not displeased with him ([v. 3](#)). Allah told this to Muhammad in response to a woman who taunted Muhammad: according to [a hadith](#), “The Prophet

became ill, so he did not stand for prayer for a night or two. Then a woman came and said, ‘O Muhammad! I think that your devil has finally left you.’” Or, in another version that comes from [Ibn Abbas](#), “When the Qur’an was revealed to the Messenger of Allah, Jibril [Gabriel] was delayed from coming to him for a number of days (on one occasion). Therefore, the Messenger of Allah was affected by this. Then the idolaters began to say, ‘His Lord has abandoned him and hates him.’”

Allah reminds Muhammad that he was an orphan, and that at that time Allah cared for him ([v. 6](#)) and that therefore he should be kind to orphans ([v. 9](#)). [Ibn Kathir explains](#): “This refers to the fact that his father died while his mother was still pregnant with him, and his mother, Aminah bint Wahb died when he was only six years old. After this he was under the guardianship of his grandfather, ‘Abdul-Muttalib, until he died when Muhammad was eight years old. Then his uncle, Abu Talib took responsibility for him and continued to protect him, assist him, elevate his status, honor him, and even restrain his people from harming him when he was forty years of age and Allah commissioned him with the prophethood.” Of course, as we have seen, many of the Meccan suras involve replies to the objections and scorn of Muhammad’s own people, the pagan Quraysh of Mecca.

In [sura 94](#), “Solace,” Allah consoles his prophet and once again reminds Muhammad of his favors to him. He has removed his burden ([v. 2](#)) and raised him to a position of esteem ([v. 4](#)). He has “expanded his breast” ([v. 1](#)) – which is akin to Allah’s promise that “those whom Allah wills to guide, He opens their breast to Islam” ([6:125](#)).

Allah warns in [sura 95](#), “The Fig Tree,” that man, although created in the “best of moulds” ([v. 4](#)), will be utterly abased to become the “lowest of the low” ([v. 5](#)) – except those who do righteous deeds ([v. 6](#)). Here again is another basis for the contempt for unbelievers that marks so much of Islamic discourse to this day – those who disbelieve are in Allah’s own words the “lowest of the low.”

Blogging the Qur'an: Sura 96, "Clots of Blood"

According to Islamic tradition, when Muhammad, a prosperous Arabian merchant from the Quraysh tribe of Mecca, was forty years old, he was praying in a cave in the mountains near Mecca. As he passed the entire night in devotion, an angel came to him and commanded him to read and recite what he read. Muhammad replied, "I do not know how to read."

The spiritual being, however, would brook no objections. According to a hadith recorded by Bukhari, he pressed his will upon Muhammad in a terrifying fashion, even going so far as to menace him physically:

(The Prophet added), "The angel caught me (forcefully) and pressed me so hard that I could not bear it anymore. He then released me and again asked me to read, and I replied, 'I do not know how to read.' Thereupon he caught me again and pressed me a second time till I could not bear it anymore. He then released me and asked me again to read, but again I replied, 'I do not know how to read (or, what shall I read?).' Thereupon he caught me for the third time and pressed me and then released me and said, 'Read! In the Name of your Lord, Who has created (all that exists). Has created man from a clot. Read! And Your Lord is Most Generous...[unto]...that which he knew not.' (V. 96:5)"

This is the famous first revelation of the Qur'an, now found as sura 96:1-5. In the standard Islamic version of this event, it was the angel Gabriel who appeared to Muhammad, but the earliest Islamic sources present a slightly more complex picture. The ninth-century Islamic historian Ibn Sa'd records a Muslim tradition asserting that an angel named Seraphel originally visited Muhammad, and was replaced by Gabriel after three years. He also records the fact that "the learned and those versed in Sirah literature" contradicted this tradition, and maintained that only Gabriel ever appeared to Muhammad. Nevertheless, it is hard to see how anyone would have gotten the idea that another angel was involved with Muhammad if Islamic tradition had been absolutely certain from the first moment that it was Gabriel.

At the beginning Muhammad regarded his spiritual encounter with considerable agitation. According to Ibn Sa'd, he "suffered much pain and his face turned dust-coloured." According to the eighth-century Islamic historian Ibn Ishaq, he wondered if he had been demonically possessed, and even contemplated suicide:

I will go to the top of the mountain and throw myself down that I may kill myself and gain rest. So I went forth to do so and then when I was midway on the mountain, I heard a voice from heaven saying: "O Muhammad! Thou art an apostle of God and I am Gabriel." I raised my head towards heaven to see (who was speaking) and lo, Gabriel in the form of a man with feet astride the horizon, saying, "O Muhammad! Thou art the apostle of God and I am Gabriel."

Muhammad returned to his wife Khadija in tremendous distress. According to Aisha (via Bukhari): "Then Allah's Messenger returned with that (the Revelation), and his heart severely beating; (and the) muscles between his neck and shoulders were trembling till he came upon Khadija (his wife) and said, 'Cover me!' They covered him, till his fear was over, and after that he said, 'O Khadija! What is wrong with me? I was afraid that something bad might happen to me.' Then he told her all that had happened."

Ibn Ishaq says that he repeated to her his initial fears: "Woe is me poet or possessed." He meant "poet" in the sense of one who received ecstatic, and possibly demonic, visions. But according to Bukhari, Khadija had more confidence in Muhammad than he did in himself. She took Muhammad to see her uncle Waraqa, a Nestorian Christian priest, who told Muhammad the identity of his

angelic visitor: “This is the same one who keeps the secrets (angel Gabriel) whom Allah had sent to Moses.”

Without the care of Khadija (who remained Muhammad’s only wife until her death) and the affirmation of Waraqa, the world might never have known Islam. Soon after Waraqa identified the being who had appeared to Muhammad, the old man died. And not long after that the prophet he had effectively anointed was again plunged into a despair so intense that he again contemplated suicide. According to Bukhari:

But after a few days Waraqa died and the Divine Revelation was also paused for a while and the Prophet became so sad as we have heard that he intended several times to throw himself from the tops of high mountains and every time he went up the top of a mountain in order to throw himself down, Gabriel would appear before him and say, “O Muhammad! You are indeed Allah’s Messenger in truth,” whereupon his heart would become quiet and he would calm down and would return home.

This scenario evidently played out again whenever Muhammad had to wait too long for Gabriel to reappear. Bukhari also records a tradition in which “whenever the period of the coming of the Revelation used to become long, [Muhammad] would do as before, but when he used to reach the top of a mountain, Gabriel would appear before him and say to him what he had said before.” In another Bukhari hadith, Muhammad reacted to the resumption of the revelations in the same way he reacted to the first one. He explained:

The Divine Inspiration was delayed for a short period but suddenly, as I was walking, I heard a voice in the sky, and when I looked up towards the sky, to my surprise, I saw the angel who had come to me in the Hira Cave, and he was sitting on a chair in between the sky and the earth. I was so frightened by him that I fell on the ground and came to my family and said (to them), “Cover me! (with a blanket), cover me!”

The rest of the sura comes from a later date, and is preoccupied with the ingratitude of man: he thinks he is self-sufficient (v. 7) when actually he depends upon Allah (v. 8). The man who tries to prevent someone from praying (vv. 9-10) is turning his back on the truth (v. 13) but will face Allah’s punishment (vv. 15-16), and no one will aid him (v. 17). Muhammad, however, should pay no attention to him, but devote himself to the worship of Allah (v. 19). Ibn Kathir says that “all this referred to Abu Jahl, may Allah curse him. He threatened the Prophet for performing Salah [Islamic prayer] at the Ka’bah.”

Blogging the Qur'an: Suras 97-114

[Sura 97](#), “The Night of Power” (more precisely “Decree” or “Destiny”) is [disputed as to whether it comes from the Meccan or Medinan period](#), but this is of little moment since the chapter contains nothing decisive doctrinally. The “Night of Power” was the occasion of Muhammad’s first revelation (v. 1) – the one recorded in 96:1-5. It is “better than a thousand months” (v. 3), for on this night the Spirit came down – that is, [according to the Tafsir al-Jalalayn](#) and others, Gabriel.

In Islam the Night of Power is a special night for prayer, generally observed on one of the last ten days of the month of Ramadan.

[Sura 98](#), “Evidence,” is [probably Medinan](#), and shares the bellicosity and contempt for the People of the Book (primarily Jews and Christians) of the Medinan suras. [Maududi says](#) that its placement after suras 96 and 97 is “very meaningful. Surah Al-Alaq [96] contains the very first revelation, while Surah Al-Qadr [97] shows as to when it was revealed, and in this Surah it has been explained why it was necessary to send a Messenger along with this Holy Book.”

Why was it necessary? Because Jews and Christians aren’t going to forsake their falsehoods without clear evidence (v. 1), and that evidence is Muhammad and the Qur’an (v. 2). Yet when Muhammad came, the People of the Book became divided over him (v. 4) – as [the Tafsir al-Jalalayn explains](#): “Before his arrival they had all agreed to believe in him when he would come; then those who disbelieved in him from among them became envious of him.” They have been commanded to worship Allah, “establish regular prayer,” and practice “regular charity” – three of the five Pillars of Islam. Those Jews and Christians who reject Muhammad and Islam are the “most vile of created beings” (v. 6) – a cardinal verse among the Qur’an’s many verses dehumanizing unbelievers – while the righteous are the best of creatures (v. 7).

[Sura 99](#), “The Earthquake,” foretells earth’s final convulsion (vv. 1-5) and the separation of the good from the evil (vv. 6-8). Are you a southpaw? [The Tafsir al-Jalalayn reports](#) that “on that day mankind shall issue forth, they will depart from the site of the Reckoning, in separate groups, divided up, so that those taking it [their book] by the right hand will go to Paradise, while those taking it by the left hand will go to the Fire...”

Five suras follow with similar warnings. [Sura 100](#), “The Chargers,” notes mankind’s ingratitude to Allah (v. 6) and warns of the Day of Judgment (vv. 9-11). [Sura 101](#), “The Calamity,” also dwells on the Day of Judgment, noting that one’s good deeds must outweigh one’s bad deeds on a scale in order to enjoy “a life of good pleasure and satisfaction” rather than the Fire (vv. 6-11). [Sura 102](#), “Competition,” criticizes those who compete for worldly goods (v. 1) and ignore the imminence of death (v. 2) and hell (v. 6). [Sura 103](#), “The Declining Day,” asserts that mankind is lost (v. 2) except for those who have faith and do good deeds (v. 3). The jurist Ash-Shafi’i [said](#): “If the people were to ponder on this Surah, it would be sufficient for them.” [Sura 104](#), “The Traducer,” calls down woe upon those wealthy (v. 2) people who gossip and sow scandal (v. 1), thinking their wealth would make them immortal (v. 3). They will be thrown into hellfire (vv. 4-6).

The early Meccan [sura 105](#), “The Elephant,” refers to an event said to have taken place in 570 A.D., the year Muhammad was born. The Yemeni Christian ruler Abrahah led a force into Arabia (a force that included elephants), intending to destroy the Ka’bah in Mecca. The guardians of the Ka’bah could offer no defense, but Allah sent flocks of birds who struck the invaders with stones (vv. 3-4). Here again is reinforced the idea that obedience to Allah will bring earthly success and prosperity, and disobedience to Allah will bring earthly ruin.

[Sura 106](#), “Quraysh,” calls upon the pagan Arab tribe of Mecca, the Quraysh (a tribe of which

Muhammad was a member), who are the custodians of the Ka'bah – at that time a pagan shrine -- to worship the real Lord of the shrine, Allah (v. 3). [Sura 107](#), “Almsgiving,” excoriates those who deny the coming Judgment (v. 1) and are unkind to orphans (v. 2) and the needy (v. 3), and neglect prayers (v. 5). [Sura 108](#), “Abundance,” addresses Muhammad, telling him that those who hate him will be cut off, having no children (v. 3). [The Tafsir al-Jalalayn says](#) that “this was revealed regarding al-‘Āsī b. Wā’il, who called the Prophet al-abtar, ‘the severed one’, when his son al-Qāsim died.” Muhammad never had a son who lived to adulthood.

[Sura 109](#), “The Unbelievers,” is frequently invoked today as one of the Qur’an’s statements of tolerance. [According to most scholars](#) it is a Meccan sura, revealed at a time when the Muslim were a small, weak, embattled band, feeling threatened by the pagan Quraysh – making it possibly a plea for tolerance for the Muslims, not a magnanimous granting of tolerance to an opposition group. [Al-Wahidi, however, explains](#) that this sura was a rejection of an invitation from the Quraysh: “Come follow our religion and we will follow yours. You worship our idols for a year and we worship you Allah the following year. In this way, if what you have brought us is better than what we have, we would partake of it and take our share of goodness from it; and if what we have is better than what you have brought, you would partake of it and take your share of goodness from it.” Muhammad rejected the offer: “Allah forbid that I associate anything with Him.”

In any case, [the Tafsir al-Jalalayn says](#) that this sura was revealed before Muhammad “was commanded to wage war” against idolaters. And Muhammad al-Ghazali, who is often cited as a reformist, writes ominously in his *Journey Through the Qur'an* about the limits of tolerance in his commentary on this sura: “Oppressing Islam and denying it the right to life cannot be tolerated. It must be explicitly stated that blood will continue to flow until this evil desire is removed and *the power of Islam is restored and its Shari’a protected and its complete implementation guaranteed*. Do the oppressors understand?” (Emphasis added.)

[Sura 110](#), “Succor,” exhorts Muhammad to praise Allah and pray for forgiveness when he sees people entering Islam “in crowds” (v. 2). This was, [according to Islamic tradition](#), the last sura revealed, when Muhammad was on his deathbed. He was master of Arabia and mass conversions were indeed taking place – so, with mission accomplished, he died.

[Sura 111](#), “Palm Fibre,” is elucidated by a hadith (Bukhari, vol. 6, book 65, no. 4770, Darussalam edition) in which Muhammad climbs a mountain and begins calling the Quraysh. When they assembled, he told them: “I am a warner to you in face of a terrific punishment.” This annoyed Abu Lahab, Muhammad’s uncle, who shouted to the Muslim prophet: “May your hands perish all this day. Is it for this purpose you have gathered us?” Muhammad thereupon received this sura, cursing Abu Lahab and his wife to hellfire.

[Sura 112](#), “Sincerity,” again rejects the idea that Allah “begets” (v. 3) – a repudiation not only of Christianity but of the pagan “daughters of Allah:” that Muhammad had briefly endorsed during [the Satanic Verses incident](#).

[Sura 113](#), “Dawn,” and [sura 114](#), “Mankind,” are known collectively as *Al-Mu‘awwidhatan*: the two suras of taking refuge in Allah from evil. They were [probably revealed early in Muhammad’s prophetic career](#), and have a particular status in Islamic piety as incantations to ward off harm -- since when Muhammad lay in bed with his final illness, he recited them over and over.

And thus ends the Qur’an, and the Blogging the Qur’an series.